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THE

THE JAGUAR QUEEN;

JAGUAR QUEEN;

OR,

THE OUTLAWS OF THE SIERRA MADRE.

BY FREDERICK WHITTAKER,
AUTHOR OF "THE MUSTANG-HUNTERS," "THE WHITE WIZARD," ETC.

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ИЕНДОЯУАТ

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(No. 267.)

THE JAGUAR QUEEN.

CHAPTER I.

THE TREE OF DEATH.

IN the north-western part of New Mexico, bordering on Arizona, lie the "Stony Plains." The edges of this table-land are clothed with stunted grass, and terminate in abrupt precipices. The center is an arid desert of sand strewed with bowlders, without a drop of water or living thing for many weary miles, terminating in the crags and precipices of the Rocky Mountain system, of which the spurs radiate through Arizona and Nevada. The Stony Plain is the last place in the world where one would expect to see a traveler; and yet travelers, in search of gold, have sometimes been found bold enough to attempt its passage, too often to pay the penalty with their lives.

At the period when our story opens, such a traveler, all alone, was slowly riding through the deep sand among the rocks in a part of the Stony Plains, never before perhaps visited by human being. He was far away from the regular track, which crosses the narrowest part of the desert from east to west, and along which one or two brackish springs are to be found.

He had evidently lost his way, and was traveling toward the only object that appeared to break the monotony of the otherwise level table-land, on which he rode.

This was a small conical peak, straight to the north of the traveler, which appeared to rise abruptly from the plain, not more than a mile off. He could see the sharp outlines of the rocks, and even detected the round heads of bushes here and there, in the deep ravines that furrowed the sides of the lonely mound.

But the strange thing about this hill was, that it was

crowned with a lofty palm tree, that grew on the very summit, and that the further the traveler went, the further off it seemed to be, and the smaller it seemed to grow. A sort of glimmering haze, arising from the excessive heat, obscured the junction of hill and desert, while the marvelous clearness of the air above it rendered the real distance extremely deceptive. And the hill was all alone in the silent desert.

The adventurer was a young and handsome man, in the gray homespun dress and broad felt hat, universal in the southwest. His face was dark and sunburned, lighted up with dark eyes, that had a sad, weary look in their depths. He was well armed, and mounted on a splendid bay horse. But the languid steps of the noble animal proclaimed that it was well-nigh exhausted. Every now and then its sides heaved in short spasmodic jerks, that became more and more frequent, till every step was accompanied with one of these "thumps." The animal was apparently in fine condition otherwise, in good flesh, and able to walk firmly, but all of a sudden it stopped dead short, and refused to proceed further. Then the young man seemed, for the first time, to notice the condition of his mount. He cast a quick glance down at the flank of his charger, and uttered an exclamation of alarm.

"Good heavens! The poor creature has got the thumps!"

The words were hardly out of his mouth, when the horse dropped on its knees, as suddenly as if it had been shot; and the rider had only time to leap off, when the poor animal uttered a groan, and sunk over on its side, where it lay gasping its last breath, to all seeming.

Gerald Leigh stood looking at his dying steed with quiet despair. All around him was the silent desert, and the deceptive peak in the distance seemed to mock him with its nearness. He had followed it from sunrise to high noon, and it seemed to be further off than ever, now.

"My poor Lightfoot!" he groaned; "as long as you lived, I had some hopes; and now we must both die together! How shall I ever get out of this desert on foot? Perhaps the hill may be as barren as the rest, if ever I do get there. Why not die now? I am weary of the struggle. Fool that I was to try this route, when I might have gone safely on the track."

The poor horse turned its head round, and gazed with imploring eyes on its master. As the animal stirred, Gerald heard a slight clink, and the sound seemed to recall him to his recollection.

"Why not?" he suddenly exclaimed. "There must be a little water left in the canteen. It may enable him to get up and follow me."

He rushed to the saddle-bow, where a round tin canteen hung, and shook it. The rattling of water was heard, as if the vessel was about half full. Gerald's eyes sparkled with hope.

"Poor Lightfoot! I'll save you yet."

He held back the head of the exhausted steed, and poured a little water down its throat. The poor animal gulped it eagerly down, for several mouthfuls, and when Leigh took the vessel away, it was empty.

"Come, Lightfoot, old fellow, cheer up, and try to get up," he said, kindly.

The horse seemed willing and eager to obey. It scrambled up to its feet, and stood still, the quick spasmodic thumps still continuing, however. Gerald Leigh looked anxious and haggard as he surveyed the comely form of his exhausted charger.

He knew the terrible nature of the disease it was laboring under. "The thumps" appears to be a sort of heart disease, generally affecting animals in the best condition, on long journeys in hot weather. It comes without warning, and is liable to culminate in sudden death at any moment. The question remained, could he get the animal as far as the distant peak?

"We must try it, Lightfoot. I might as well die here, as get through alive without a horse. The Kioways would get me in a week if I were on foot. Come then, old horse."

He loosened the girth of the saddle, and the horse gave a sigh of relief. Then, with the sharp point of his bowie-knife, he opened a vein in Lightfoot's neck, and as the red blood spouted forth, the quick, spasmodic thumps in the flank grew less and less, and the charger uttered a low whinny of gratitude.

Leigh stanched the flowing blood, when the horse had

bled about two quarts, and was rejoiced to see that it was able to follow him cheerfully.

Then he started on his weary way through the soft sand, toiling on toward the solitary peak among the bowlders.

The sun beat down on his head, and the glare from the ground was like the breath of a furnace. Every little rock was magnified by the mirage into a hill of itself, and seemed to shake and quiver, as the streams of heated air moved upward from the scorching plain.

Gerald Leigh had left the regular track the morning of the day before, with a good supply of water, lured by the sight of the distant palm-tree, which seemed even then to be but a few hours' ride from the road. Had he known the Indian superstition about it, he would never have undertaken the task. That solitary palm-tree was visible at times above the mirage for a hundred and twenty miles, at others it disappeared altogether. The traditions of the Comanches called it the Spirit Tree, and after several warriors had died in the desert, trying to reach it, it assumed the more gloomy title of the "Tree of Death."

For the tree had lured many a warrior to his death. Less happy than Gerald, they had left their bones in the desert before they had even caught a full sight of the mound itself. Only the uncommon vigor of his horse, and the full supply of water he had taken had enabled him to get thus far alive. And even faithful, enduring Lightfoot had given out at last.

Gerald Leigh walked steadily on. He was doggedly determined on marching on till he reached that hill, if he died at its foot. All through the scorching afternoon he pressed steadily on, Lightfoot following behind till the sun began slowly to decline on his left hand, and the long, black shadows of man and horse fell far over the yellow plain to his right.

As the sun set, the horse began to step out more briskly. The quivering streams of heated air also abated, and objects assumed more natural proportions. Then Gerald saw for the first time the cause of his deception as to the solitary mound. Its foot was no longer visible, but the sharp line of the horizon of sand cut the side of the hill in two. He realized that this conical hill must be only the top of some lofty mountain or

volcanic origin, rising from the midst of a deep depression in the desert, concealed from view by the constant mirage. And he realized also that he must be near the *edge* of this depression at last, for he was no longer deceived as to the hill. That must still be several miles off.

As he walked on, pondering and wondering, the sun went down, and darkness fell over the earth almost instantaneously. In that cloudless atmosphere twilight was but a moment. Then the stars came out, and seemed to smile on the belated wanderer; and man and horse pressed on toward the mysterious palm-tree, alone in the desert.

CHAPTER II.

THE DESERT GARDEN.

WHEN the darkness fell, and the stars came out, our hero was still uncertain as to his distance from the Spirit Tree. He was faint, weary, and parched with thirst, but the swift coolness of eventide revived both him and his steed. The short, heavy palpitations of the poor animal's flanks, which had by no means entirely ceased since the bleeding, became less and less every moment. The charger began to prick up its ears and snuff the air, pressing forward on the bridle, so that Gerald was forced to step out briskly to keep up with it.

"He scents water!" said Gerald, joyfully. "We are getting nearer." And they pursued their journey at a half run, the man keeping up with the horse with some difficulty. At last Lightfoot became uncontrollable in his eagerness. He pawed the air and reared up, whinnying eagerly; and with a sudden jerk, snatched away the bridle from his master's hand, and went off at full gallop.

Gerald ran after his horse, calling to it in vain, and full of fears lest he should lose it. He saw the dark figure flitting over the ghostly, glimmering sand, and ran on at his utmost speed, panting for breath. But the horse was almost

out of sight in the gloom in a few minutes, and the belated traveler slackened his pace to a walk, in perfect despair.

Almost as soon as he did so, the faint, doubtful light of the rising moon in the east inspired him with fresh hope, and he quickened his pace, catching a glimpse of the flying horse in the increasing luster.

The moon rose up like a silver disk. In the pure atmosphere of the table-land there were no mists to obscure the radiance. Gerald made the best of his way after his horse, and suddenly the animal stopped dead short, in full career. The traveler uttered a cry of joy and ran up, but the animal, as quickly, wheeled sharp round to the east, and trotted off with flowing mane, snorting and whimpering.

The moment after, Gerald Leigh beheld at once the cause of his loss, and his salvation. He stood at the edge of a sheer precipice of rock, and looked down into the mysterious valley of the Spirit Tree. He saw a lonely mound in the center, and a girdling lake, heard the lowing of cattle, and beheld the glimmering light of a distant fire by the water-side.

Only for a moment could he gaze, however. Wonderful as the sight was, he could not stay to investigate it, while his horse was running away. The fire argued human beings in presence.

What could they be but Indians? If Indians, he was lost, on foot. He must catch Lightfoot.

So away went man and horse, unconscious of all fatigue, now, the one spurred by hope, the other by fear. They skirted the edge of the precipitous crater, for such it evidently was, for some time, the horse gaining rapidly, till Gerald beheld the black line of a crevasse, radiating from the edge of the valley, out into the desert, to the north-east.

Lightfoot wheeled around again, and galloped up the line of the crevasse for some distance, when he suddenly halted, turned round, and disappeared into the bowels of the earth.

Gerald Leigh stopped and took breath, now. It was evident that he could not hope to catch his horse before it was in the valley, so that he might as well go slow.

His throat was parched with thirst, and he staggered ra-

ther than walked on, to the place where the animal had gone down.

When he arrived there, he beheld what he had imagined, a deep, narrow cleft or cañon, with perpendicular walls, through the end of which the strange valley was visible.

Down through the middle of this cañon ran a smooth, white, slanting path, formed of the soft sand, that had drifted in from the desert without, in the course of ages. As Gerald saw it, he wondered that the same deposit had not filled up the whole valley, long ago. But without wasting time in useless speculations, he turned down the path, and in a few minutes more found himself at the portals of the mysterious valley.

Before him were meadows of green grass, wet with dew, interspersed with clumps of noble trees; and the first living animal he saw was his own horse, drinking at a little spring by the foot of a spreading live-oak, which was heavily draped with white "Spanish moss."

Gerald Leigh uttered a low exclamation of intense thankfulness, as he threw himself down by the animal; and man and horse drank together from the same spring. Lightfoot made no more efforts to escape. The tired creature lay down on the soft grass, completely exhausted, and hardly able to crop a few mouthfuls for several minutes.

Then Gerald Leigh removed saddle and bridle, and picketed his charger with the long lariat. After a little while Lightfoot proved the stanchness of his noble breed by rolling, and finally got up and went eagerly to work to feed.

"You'll do, old horse," said his master, with great satisfaction. "And now to explore the valley for friends or enemies."

He examined his weapons with great care, recapped his revolver and rifle, and finally started off up the valley, to the half-seen lake, which glittered in the moonlight, between the park-like clumps of trees, at the foot of the lofty, conical mound. The brief glance he had cast from the top of the rocks had failed to reveal any thing to him, except the fire, which spoke of human habitation. Still, he expected to see the outlines of Indian wigwams at some turn of his path; and when he came from behind the shelter of a dense copse,

and beheld before him a group of long, low houses of stone, with high-pitched roofs of straw thatch, he was fairly astounded.

The buildings were arranged in an oblong rectangle, around an ample barn-yard, where several ricks and hay-stacks reared their well-known conical heads. Even in the pale moonlight, there was an air of comfort and plenty about the place that told of careful farming. There were no rude log shanties. Even the barn, which was enormous, was built of stone below, in the Pennsylvania fashion, with a superstructure of plank, perfectly weather-tight. The presence of thatch, instead of shingles, was the only odd feature of the farm-buildings to American eyes.

Gerald Leigh gazed for some moments in silent wonder. Then he advanced boldly.

"Whoever they be, they are civilized Christians," he reasoned. "With such I am safe."

Lights were gleaming from the windows of the largest of the farm-buildings; and he could hear the clatter of dishes and the sounds of gay voices, in conversation and laughter. It seemed like the work of magic to the lately lonely wanderer in the arid desert. He walked quietly forward, and stopped under the large open window whence the light came, where he listened for a few moments.

There were male and female voices together, in a gay hub-bub, with the shrill treble of children; and two languages appeared to be spoken indifferently by all. A question would be given in German, which Leigh partially understood, and the answer would be in English. The conversation, too, seemed to be on a subject perfectly amazing to find in the wilderness.

It was about *crinoline*!

An animated discussion was going forward between the voices of several girls, as to *whether hoops were in fashion still in New York, or gone out!*

Gerald Leigh rubbed his eyes and muttered:

"Am I dreaming or drunk, or are these people mad?"

His mental question was answered by a deep, powerful voice in the house, speaking in English.

"What is the use of discussing the question, girls? You'll

see when you get to the settlements. That fashion-book is dated in '56, and here we are in '57. The fashion may have changed ten times over since then. Best go as you are — eh, father Hartstein?"

The reply was in German, from a male voice, and was broken in upon by a chorus of girls, crying :

" Go as we are, indeed ! We shall be perfect frights !"

Gerald Leigh could not repress a silent laugh. He turned away and walked round the house to the front, where he saw the dying embers of the fire that had attracted his attention from the top of the rocks. It had been built, to all appearance, for mere luxury, in the chill of the evening air, which had cooled sensibly in the short time since sunset.

But Gerald Leigh was getting most unromantically hungry ; and the scent of the savory soup within the house, more than even the pleasant female voices, invited him to knock at the door of the hospitable-looking home in the wilderness.

He advanced to the door and was about to knock, when he heard a sound that caused him, bold as he was, to recoil with terror.

It was the deep growl of a jaguar !

CHAPTER III.

A STRANGE HOUSEHOLD.

HE looked round and beheld a sight that fairly froze his blood. At right angles to the end of the house was a low shed, fronting the door diagonally ; and seven full-grown jaguars, with two grizzly bears, and several jaguar kittens, had risen simultaneously, and were advancing toward him with flaming eyes.

Hardly knowing what he did, he fired aimlessly at one of them ; and in a moment a tempest of roars and growls, mingled with the rattling of chains, fairly deafened him. Gerald Leigh started back, just as the whole posse of terrible crea-

tures leaped at him, straining and tugging at their chains and roaring furiously.

The sound of rattling iron reassured him somewhat, as he halted with clubbed rifle, expecting his death.

Then there was a confused noise in the house, the door was flung open, and a tall, magnificently-framed girl, dressed in some strange, picturesque style, such as he had never seen, rushed out, with a long whip in her hand, followed by several men, who looked like giants in the moonlight.

“Down, brutes, down!” cried the strange girl, in clear, powerful tones, striking right and left with the long whip, as fearlessly as if the creatures had been dogs. “Back, I say! What’s the matter with you? Back!”

And, to Gerald’s amazement, the terrible creatures slunk back under the shed like whipped curs—growling and grumbling, it is true, but still submissive to a single girl.

But he had not time to do more than notice it. The men who rushed out of the house were all armed with naked swords; and after a swift glance around, they rushed at him, and in a moment he was seized by five strong hands, while the gruff interrogatories were put to him from as many voices:

“*Wo bist du?*” (Who are you?)

“*Was mach’st du hier?*” (What brings you here?)

Gerald was silent for a moment. He was in the hands of men, any one of whom was more than a match for him in personal strength, and he felt like a child in their grasp. As soon as he could speak, for surprise and agitation at the storm he had unwittingly raised, he answered:

“If you’ll let me speak, I’ll tell you, gentlemen. There’s no need to strangle me.”

“Who are you then?” demanded a young Hercules, with flowing yellow hair and beard, motioning to the rest to release him. “Drop your arms, or off goes your hand at the wrist.”

“By all means,” said Gerald, quietly. “I am a traveler, who has lost his way in the Stony Plain. That’s all.”

“Which way came you?” demanded the young man, sternly. “From the south or north? No equivocation!”

“I mean none,” said Gerald, boldly. “Who are you that ask?”

"One who has a right to ask," said his interrogator. "Man, be quick, or your life is not worth a kreutzer."

The rest had let go of the prisoner—for such he seemed—and Gerald chafed under the imperative tone of the young giant.

"Cut me down, then!" he said, doggedly. "I thought you were civilized beings, and you behave like savages. Take off your hands or I'll not say a word."

The youth was about to make a furious retort, when a deep voice broke on the angry colloquy.

"For shame, Fritz! 'Tis but one man. Let him loose."

The young man released Gerald in a moment, and the latter looked up and beheld the colossal form of a white-bearded old patriarch, accompanied by another elderly man, tall, thin, and slightly stooping. This man had a keen, essentially American face, and addressed Gerald with much politeness.

"You must excuse neighbor Hartstein's rough lads, sir. They never saw a strange white face in their lives before, and are suspicious of Indian intruders. But how, in the name of wonder, came you here alive, and by which side? We thought it an impossibility for any one to get here."

"I came from the south," said Gerald. "I don't see any thing so wonderful in it. *You* have got here, any way, and you must have come some time."

The stranger smiled.

"Ay, we came here, truly; but that was many years ago, and we had advantages you had not. But that is a long story, young man. Brother Hartstein and I had a hard time getting here, I can tell you. How did you come?"

"On horseback," said Gerald. "I saw the palm-tree that has led me such a chase, two days ago, and my horse nearly died before I got here. He's down in the valley now, feeding; but, if you'll excuse the mention of it, I am nearly starving. I took plenty of water, as I thought, but I have eaten nothing since yesterday morning."

Brother Hartstein, the patriarch, hurriedly interposed.

"My poor young man, come in at once, then. We thought you were some emissary of the Mormons, come to spy us out and murder us all."

"The Mormons!" echoed Gerald. "Why, sir, the nearest Mormon is several thousand miles off."

"What! have they moved again?" demanded Hartstein, anxiously. "Brother Burton, this is news, indeed! Where are they, sir?"

Gerald could not help laughing at the earnest query.

"Why, sir, they're out in Utah, by the Salt Lake. They were driven out of Illinois first, and then out of Kansas. Why, where have you lived, not to know that?"

"In this valley," replied Hartstein, simply. "Ach Gott! but that is good news. Brother Burton, we can go out safely, can we not?"

"I thought as much," said Brother Burton, smiling. "Your German caution beats us Yankees all hollow, Brother Hartstein. You forgot that the American people keep on advancing, and that young Brigham might meet a match yet."

"Ach Gott!" said Hartstein, sadly; "he was too much for us, Burton. Did we not see poor Diedrich slaughtered by the terrible Danites, and we fleeing for our lives? But come, young man. We forget our hospitality in curiosity. Enter our happy little home, such as it is, and you shall have no cause to regret the accident that brought you here."

Gerald followed his hosts to the door of the house, where they found all the women and children of the community gathered to gaze at the stranger.

The little ones hid behind their relatives' skirts and gazed at the intruder as if he were a wild beast, although he saw the same children run right in between the bears and jaguars, to get to the door, when he came in, without a shadow of fear. The girls and women behaved according to their natures, as people totally unused to strangers. The younger ones were very shy, the elder ones a little stiff and awkward. The only exceptions were two old ladies, who were introduced to him as Frau Hartstein and Sister Burton. They, indeed, welcomed the young stranger with immense cordiality; Frau Hartstein, in particular, overwhelming him with her rapid German talk, and pressing food on him, enough to satiate a hungry lion.

In a very short time Gerald Leigh began to feel as if he was at home amidst this singular circle; and his interest and

curiosity increased every moment to find who they were, and how they came there.

As he became more used to them, he began to distinguish persons, and to notice the difference of characters.

There were two distinct families in the little colony, German and American, and both were apparently closely connected by intermarriages between their respective members.

First, there was father Hartstein, with seven stalwart sons of various ages, five of them married to as many daughters of the almost equally prolific Brother Burton.

Then there was blooming Katrina Hartstein, the only maiden of full age, at whom Sextus Burton, the youngest of the tribe, was ever casting sheep's-eyes, which the young lady scorned, Sextus being two years her junior and two inches shorter.

Katrina Hartstein was nearly as tall as Gerald Leigh, who stood six feet in his stockings ; and her beauty was of the rarest type, seldom found in Germany, but when found, irresistible. Gerald caught himself looking at her perpetually.

The children were not to be numbered. Gerald counted up to twenty-three, and gave up counting in despair ; and yet the oldest mother was less than thirty, leaving out, of course, the wives of the patriarchs.

The Burtons were thin and dark, the Hartsteins gigantic and fair.

From certain indications of language and manner, Gerald judged that Brother Burton was a clergyman, while father Hartstein might have been any thing, from a practical mechanic to a cabinet minister, so much familiarity did he display with every subject, from blacksmith's work to political economy. His education was better than Gerald's own, to all seeming, and yet the latter was a graduate of Harvard, in her best days.

The more he talked and listened, the more did Gerald wonder at such a mine of learning hid away in the desert ; and when the young man had finished his supper, and was ushered into a large room opening into the eating-room, and handsomely furnished with heavy carved arm-chairs and settees, he involuntarily said :

"Mr. Hartstein, how ever did you get all this furniture here?"

"We have made it with our own hands," said the patriarch. "We Germans spend a long time in learning a trade, but we learn it well. I was a carpenter and joiner in Bavaria once, and I spent a second apprenticeship at cabinet-making. Brother Burton was a machinist before he became a minister; and I tell you, young man, 'tis a good thing to have a trade, and better to have two, *if you know them well.*"

"I can believe it," said Gerald, frankly. "I wish I had one, at times, for I should not be seeking my fortune then, as I am now."

"Seeking a fortune is like chasing a wild goose," said Brother Burton, dryly. "Both are hard to catch. Father Hartstein, it grows late. Time for prayers. Katrina, bring the Good Book."

In half an hour after, Gerald Leigh was alone in a comfortable room, thinking of Katrina Hartstein's blue eyes and blonde braids. As he slowly undressed, a little case fell from the bosom of his dress to the ground. Leigh started and flushed violently, as he picked it up.

"Blanche!" he muttered. "I had forgotten her entirely. Gerald Leigh, has the honor of a Southern gentleman yielded to the beauty of a wild girl of the desert? I must leave here soon, or I shall make a fool of myself, or worse, a knave."

But try as he would to drive away the vision, the calm, haughty face of Katrina Hartstein *would* come between him and the pale, aristocratic beauty of Blanche Heyward, his betrothed. And, in his dreams that night, the two were inextricably mingled together, till he woke next morning with a start, to hear the jaguars roaring for their breakfast, and the clear voice of Katrina singing "Die Wacht am Rhein."

CHAPTER IV.

THE MINERS' CAMP.

IN a sheltered valley of the Mogallon Mountains, one series of the network of valleys and sierras that intersect Arizona in all directions, a party of men were gathered around a square of four wagons by several fires, while a small herd of horses, mules and cattle fed not far off on the sweet grasses of the valley. The wagons were secured together with iron chains, at all points save one entrance, left to admit the animals to shelter when they should be satisfied with feeding. The men gathered around the fires were all armed to the teeth, and their resolute bronzed faces and rough costume announced that they were no novices at the business, but old mountain men. Hunters they were not, with one or two exceptions. The hunter costume of the south-west is too well known to need to be described. These men were all frontier roughs; and their huge wading boots (almost universal), and the abundance of picks and spades lying about camp, announced them as miners, probably prospecting for gold or silver.

That they had a leader, and were in first class order under him, was evident. That tall, heavily-built gentleman, with heavy gray mustache, seems to be the chief, for the miners address him very seldom, and then always touch their caps, military fashion, a salute punctiliously returned by the chief, who goes by the title of "Major," and sometimes is addressed as "Major Heyward."

Major Heyward's fire is apart from the rest, and built close to the rear of one of the wagons; and the major appears to be holding a conversation with some one inside the wagon. The replies that come from thence are too soft in tone for a man, and it becomes plain that a woman is the tenant of the vehicle.

"And what makes you think that we shall have trouble to-night, papa?" asked this soft voice, presently

"Because Mike Johnson came in a little while ago, my dear," answered the major, "and told us that he had come across Indian sign, not twelve hours old. As soon as the sun sets I shall order the horses in the corral. I have too many thousand dollars at stake in this caravan to afford to lose my horses, to say nothing of all our scalps."

"Mike Johnson!" exclaimed the voice inside, pettishly. "What does that obstinate old man know about it? Don't you remember, papa, how stupid he was when I told him that the world was round, how he swore that no one could make him believe any such stuff? I don't believe he knows any thing about Indians. Besides, we've not seen a single one, coming through the mountains, that was any thing but a beggar for little trinkets."

"Because we were well armed, my dear," said the major, gravely. "If we had been weak, they might not have been so civil. There are plenty around. Perhaps they may be watching us even now. Johnson is positive about the recent sign."

"What does he mean by *sign*, I wonder?" queried Blanche Heyward, the major's spoiled daughter. "I've heard so much of 'sign,' and I couldn't see any signs."

"Perhaps you'd better ask Mike himself, my dear," said her father. "Here he comes to report."

As he spoke, a tall, grizzled old trapper, with a face that denoted a very positive and obstinate character, approached the fire, saluted respectfully, and observed:

"Thur bean't no sorter doubt, major. Thar's red-skins all about these diggin's, and ef we wanter mine hyar, we'll hev to fight fur it. Thur's 'Pash and Navahoe watchin' us, this minit"

"How do you know, Mike?" inquired Blanche, and a beautiful face, pale and clear cut, with a strong expression of pride and willfulness on it, looked out from the rear of the wagon. "I've got as good eyes as you, and I can't see these Indians you talk of. You must have dreamed it."

The old hunter gave a grim smile.

"Mebbe ye hev better eyes than mine, Miss Blanche," he said, "but ye hain't lived as many year as I hev. Ye kain't see the stars up yonner yet, but ye know they're *thar*, cause

they're sure to cum out when the sun goes down. And I know them Injuns is thar, 'cause I've seen thur sign as thick as buffler-wallers in the spring."

"Well then, Mike, tell me what you mean by *sign*," said the young lady. "I've heard so much of it, and I can't understand it. What is *sign*?"

The old hunter scratched his head reflectively a moment, and then answered, considerably mollified by this appeal to his knowledge: "Wal, Miss Blanche, it ar' hard to say what sign are. It mout be one thing and it mout be 'nother. Thur's different sign fur b'ar, and painter, and buffler, and goats, and thur's sign for all the different bands o' reds. Ef I cum on a track, I kin tell, and so kin any one, if 'twar a b'ar or a buffler made it, cause one's got huffs and t'other's got feet jest like a human. And ef I cum on mustang tracks it are easy to tell ef they war ridden or not."

"Why? How can you tell that?" asked Blanche, interested and showing more respect in her manner. The old hunter had got her on unknown ground, and she began to see that he might know something after all.

"Easy enough," said Mike. "When a herd of mustangs goes ahead, thur's allers colts with them, and thur feet's smaller. And then thur's allers young studs as goes gallopin' off, on a bu'st like, and kicking up thur heels and squealin'. But ef thur ridden by Injuns they goes along steady, and the track's as straight as an arrer. Now, I seen the tracks of twenty-five mustangs to-day, goin' at a gallop, when I war scoutin' ahead of the wagins, and you 'uns was stuck in a gulch behind."

"How did you know they were going at a gallop?" asked Blanche. "And if they were, what of it?"

"A hoss's feet makes different marks goin' at a gallop from a walk," said Mike. "You finds 'em in pairs, and the dirt's all thrown out behind 'em. And these hosses was goin' a good streak right across our track. Wal, I know'd they was Injuns, but I didn't know how ter place 'em till I got off the ole mar', and looked close at the track, and then I seen that some of them hosses was shod on the front of the feet with round shoes, sich as the Navahoes makes, and no other Injuns. So I know'd them was Navahoes."

"But you said there were Apaches, too," said the major. "How did you find them?"

"Seen 'em," said Mike, laconically.

"When, how, where?" asked the major, excitedly. As he spoke, he looked up at the rocks around, apprehensively.

"Yesterday, day afore, fur a week," said Mike, coolly. "Thur's been a band follerin' us sence we left Nevada, but thur warn't any danger, fur I seen the track of the lodge-poles on the trail till yesterday. Thur the squaws turned off to the south, and the warriors is still on our trail."

"What do you mean by the track of the lodge-poles?" asked Blanche, curiously. "And how did that take away the danger?"

"Why, yer see, Miss Blanche, when the Injuns travels with thur squaws and papoosees, they takes down thur lodges, packs up thur duds and fixin's, and sticks 'em on the lodge-poles. Then they fastens one end of two poles to a hoss's saddle, and leaves t'other end trailin' on the ground, 'cause they hain't got no waggins like we has. And when yer see the track of them two poles a-scrapin' along, yer may know the hull tribe's movin', squaws and all. And when a Injun has his squaws with him, he ain't so apt to be on the fight; but when yer don't see the lodge-poles, yer may know it is either a war-party or a huntin'-party, and it don't make a bit o' difference which; *them's p'ison.*"

"And you think that a war-party is following us?" said the major, gravely. "We must be careful in our watch to-night, Mike, and get the horses in, bright and early."

"All right, major," said the hunter, saluting. "Trust to Mike Johnson to keep 'em, sir. All the 'Pash in the mountains can't get into this hy'ar corral, ef we keep a good guard on; and they ain't a-goin' through us, ef I knows it. Talkin' o' which, major, it's e'na'most time to get the beasts in. The sun's gettin' down, and thur ain't much twilight these days."

"You're right, Mike," said the major, reflectively. "Order them in, and then we'll set the guards for the night."

Mike Johnson turned away; and very soon the sonorous cracking of long whips announced that the teamsters were

driving in their animals to the shelter of the corral, being four eight-mule teams, two riding horses, and several milch cows.

The major appeared to be a rich man, and able to travel in style, for all these equipages and animals were his own private property, while the men in attendance were hired with his money. This accounted for the order and discipline pervading the camp, so different from the free and easy reckless ways of similar trains of emigrants.

Major Heyward was one of those California farmers who accumulated colossal fortunes by a few lucky seasons, and lost them in venturesome speculations in mining. At present he was "prospecting" in Arizona, looking for those silver mines with the accounts of which the California press, at the time, fairly teemed, and heretofore he had not met with very encouraging luck.

His daughter, Blanche, an only child, petted and spoiled, had insisted on accompanying him on the expedition, notwithstanding its dangers, and so far, thanks to constant preparation and their formidable armament, they had escaped all harm. Blanche sat watching the securing of the animals in silence, for some time. At last she suddenly said:

"I wonder when we shall see poor Gerald, papa. He can not be far off, but I fear he has had no more success than we have, in his mining. I often wish we'd never sent him there. We had enough for all."

The major frowned, a thing he did not often do to his daughter.

"I thought we had done with Gerald Leigh's name, Blanche," he said, sharply. "You certainly were as willing as I was, to send him away to make his fortune; and I'm decided on one point, that no daughter of mine shall ever marry a man poorer than herself. If Gerald Leigh is unfortunate, I am sorry for him. I will help him with my purse as a friend, but he can not have my daughter. That I am resolved on."

"I don't see why you need be so cross about it," said Blanche, pettishly. "I dare say there are plenty of other men in the world besides Gerald Leigh, and since he's been a year now without writing, I don't feel myself at all bound

to him. But, oh ! papa, who's this coming here ? Oh, heavens ! it's the Indians, I do believe !"

As she spoke, several shots echoed from the sides of the valley, and a single horseman, dressed as a soldier, came galloping out of a pass at full speed toward them, followed by three Indians.

Instantly the miners' camp was full of bustle and excitement.

CHAPTER V.

CAPTAIN RICHMOND.

THE nearer the stranger came, the more eager did the Indians seem to be in his pursuit, shooting bullet after bullet in vain at his flying figure. He was dressed in the uniform of an army officer, and well mounted ; but seemed to be unarmed, for he returned none of the Indians' shots, contenting himself with keeping ahead of them, and crouching down in his saddle to escape the shots. As the Indians neared the camp, however, they seemed to lose courage in the pursuit, for they suddenly wheeled within about a hundred yards off, and fled up the valley.

But the turn came too late for one of them. The crackling of rifles echoed from the camp, and the foremost Indian fell dead from his horse. The strange officer, hitherto fleeing, seemed to be wonderfully encouraged by this shot, for he wheeled round sharp and dashed after his late pursuers. His horse, a beautiful mouse-colored mustang, proved himself far fleeter than the Indian chargers, and half a dozen bounds brought him alongside. Then it was that the stranger proved to have a sword at all events, whatever his condition as regards fire-arms might have been, for the miners could see him draw it, come upon the left rear of the Indian, and deal him a powerful blow on the back of the head. The savage tottered and would have fallen to the ground but for the grasp of the other, who seized him by the scalp-lock, and

in that manner hauled him into camp, the captive of his very remarkable prowess.

Blanche Heyward had watched the whole conflict with sparkling eyes, intensely interested in the fortunes of the pursued officer. When she saw him finally riding into their camp with his prisoner, she uttered an exclamation of thankful delight and cried :

"Nobly done! Was it not, papa?"

"He's a cool hand and a good horseman, my dear," said her father, with much less enthusiasm. "The trick was prettily done, I must admit. Come, I must go down and see who he is. Probably some officer with dispatches, intercepted on his way to his destination by the Indians."

The major threw his rifle across his arm as he spoke, and walked down to the entrance of the corral, where the stranger was now seated on his horse, surrounded by an eager, questioning crowd of miners. No sooner was her father's back turned, than willful Miss Blanche jumped out of the fore part of the wagon, a trim little figure, in a sort of Bloomer dress, adapted for the rough traveling of the sierra, and followed him down to the corral entrance, to hear the news and see the stranger.

She found the latter engaged in telling his adventures to her father in a tone of animation, and with a flood of words very unlike Blanche's previous ideas of a stiff military officer. The shoulder-straps of the strange officer announced him to be a captain of the staff, and in reply to a question of major Heyward's, he said :

"You see, sir, I am on General D——'s staff, and the General sent me on a tour of inspection of some of the forts round here. 'Richmond,' said he (my name is Captain Richmond, at your service, major), 'Richmond,' said he, 'these fellows are getting lazy out on this frontier, and want a little stirring up. They tell me the Apaches are pretty quiet now, so you take a platoon and visit the posts' (he named them), 'changing your guard and sending them back at each station. Report fully.' Well, major, you know it doesn't take us soldiers long to get ready. I saddled Tom Trot, and was off before dark, and visited all the forts between here and Prescott. I didn't see any Indians or traces of any, and began

to think that they must be getting civilized, so this morning, when I left Fort Edward, I declined taking a platoon of cavalry, and was satisfied with a single guide. But I tell you, major, I soon found cause to regret it. About two hours ago we were fired on, the guide killed, and Tom Trot wounded as you see, in the haunch, luckily a slight wound. Then I had to skedaddle, I tell you, and I don't know how I should have come out if I had not seen your wagons when I did."

He paused, and raising his cap in a profound salutation to Blanche Heyward, added :

"But I shall deem both accident and danger pleasures, since they have brought me into the company of this young lady, whom I can not err in thinking your daughter, major, from the likeness."

Blanche Heyward blushed deeply. In the interest of the story she had insensibly approached close to her father's side, and stood, with her arm in his, listening to Captain Richmond's rapid utterance. Her father, too, seemed to realize who was there for the first time, for he started, half-frowned, and said, in an undertone :

"Blanche, Blanche, how often have I warned you against coming out among these men in that familiar manner! But since you are out, we must be polite."

Then turning to Richmond, he formally presented the young people to each other, observing :

"You had the advantage of me at first, captain, for you appeared to know my name as soon as you came into camp."

Captain Richmond seemed to hesitate a moment, and his keen black eyes were roving over the camp as he answered :

"Oh, ay, yes. Well, you see, major, we had heard that you were in this vicinity from some of the scouts, and when I saw the wagons I took it for granted that you were Major Heyward. But I suppose that we shall have some trouble to-night, from the fact of my being followed. We must be on our look-out. Lucky I took that fellow prisoner, was it not? What do you say, major? Will you allow me to help you in posting your guards? As a staff officer I have had some experience that way."

"Thank you, captain," said the major, a little stiffly; "but

I think I feel competent to do all that; and then there is only one party responsible."

"Oh, certainly, certainly," said Richmond, hurriedly. "I only offered from good motives. I've seen so many horses stolen and camps surprised by not posting guards properly, that I thought you might be glad. But let it pass. I assure you I'm too glad to find my scalp safe to insist upon it. I suppose I shall have to stay with you now, owing to my rashness, till we get to Fort Churchill."

"You are very welcome, I am sure, captain," said the old major, with stately courtesy. "The gallantry of your conduct, a little while ago, fully redeems its previous rashness. Please to dismount and enter the camp. My daughter will take care of you, and I will set the guards and examine your prisoner."

Captain Richmond appeared to entertain no sort of objection to this part of the programme, for he dismounted and resigned his horse to one of the miners with the matter-of-course air of a regular officer, and then strolled away arm in arm with Miss Blanche, with whom he was soon in intimate conversation.

The captain was just the sort of man to ingratiate himself with a young lady quickly, for he was a good-looking fellow enough, lithe, agile and graceful, with remarkably piercing black eyes, and a well waxed jetty mustache, in spite of his wild ride. Blanche was charmed with him for the polished ease of his manner, and especially since she had seen him, single-handed, turn on his two pursuers, and disable one of them so cleverly.

That her opinion was not shared by every one in camp, however, soon became plain; for the rough miners seemed from the first to have taken a prejudice against the trim, handsome officer. Frontiersmen are apt to underestimate any one not as rough in appearance as themselves, and especially as they saw him walking off with their adored young lady did they growl to each other about "the d—d popinjay officer, in his peacock feathers, who was putting on too much style, he was."

But the most outspoken in his dislike was old Mike Johnson, who vented his displeasure to the major in sundry grumblings, as the latter was superintending the fastening up

of the corral for the night and the proper bestowal of the animals.

The first remark that Mike made astonished the major, for the old trapper asked, with a tone of ill-dissembled scorn :

" Who d'ye think shot that there hoss of Cap. Richmond's, your honor ? "

CHAPTER VI.

MIKE'S SUSPICIONS.

" Why, the Indians, of course, Mike," said the major. " Who else ? "

" Nary Injun," said Mike, contemptuously. " The cuss shot him *hisself*."

" Shot him himself, Mike ! What do you mean ? How do you know ? "

" Easy enough, major. Look at this hyar animal, and see whar he's hit. Ef he'd been shot by any one outside, the bullet must 'a' come from that side, and you'd 'a' see'd a hole plugged right squar' through him. Ef it had 'a' missed and glanced like, the track must 'a' be'n *crostwise*, either over his croup or acrost his hunkies. But jest you look hyar, major. This hyar bullet hev passed *from above back'ards*, jest grazin' the root of the tail."

" Well, Mike, what of that ? " demanded the major. " Might not some one from the rocks in front and above have fired at the rider, missed him and struck the horse ? You talk nonsense. There's no doubt of one thing at least, that the Indians were after him. You're too suspicious."

" Mebbe I am, and mebbe I ain't," said Mike, shaking his head positively. " But this I will say, that that 'ere bullet war placed jest whar it oughter, to skeer a hoss like sixty, without hurtin' him the least mite. And look hyar, major, twarn't nowt but a pistol ball arter all. Perhaps the cuss mout 'a' fired at one o' them as war arter him, and done it to the hoss, and then ag'in p'raps he moutn't."

" Why, what do you mean, Mike Johnson ? " said the major

irritably. "What are you driving at? This gentleman's a United States officer, and we can't mistake one thing, that the Indians were after him, when the sight of our camp halted and turned them."

Mike Johnson shook his head and growled:

"No Injun never shot that hoss, and no white man in his senses never kum out in the mountains with nowt but a cheese-knife. Why, he hadn't even got a revolver."

"Then what has become of your fine theory about his shooting his own horse?" said the major. "A bungler like that couldn't have unhorsed and disabled that Indian, as we saw him do."

"That Injun ain't hurt," said Mike, in the same contemptuous tone he had used all through the conversation. "You jest look at him clost, and you'll see he's playin' 'possum."

"So much the more reason to look sharp for him," said the major. "Now you go and see him securely bound while I set the guard round the corral. We must keep our eyes skinned to-night, Mike."

"All right, sir," said Mike. "I'll attend to *him*, and ef he gits away, he'll be smarter than Mike Johnson, that's all I've got to say."

And Mike turned away to where the Indian prisoner was sitting on the ground, sullen and silent, surrounded by a number of miners, staring at his dark visage.

The major called up the regular guard for the first watch of the night, consisting of one-fifth of his entire camp. He posted sentries at the four angles of the camp, two in each angle, to watch all the approaches, and having seen that the chains effectually prevented a sudden entrance from without, he returned to the place where Mike Johnson was busy securing the prisoner.

The Indian submitted to the operation in sullen silence, and Mike performed it with true backwoods science, twisting and twining the cord in a way to defy the utmost ingenuity to untie, without assistance from without.

"Well, Mike, I guess he's safe enough," said Heyward, smiling.

"Mebbe he is, and mebbe he ain't," said Mike, doubtfully.

"He is ef we keep a guard over him with a cocked rifle, but ef not, he won't be hyur in the mornin'."

"Oh, nonsense, Mike," said his chief, laughing. "You're made up of suspicion. The devil himself couldn't untie those cords without help. This fellow's safe enough without a guard, but to please you, I'll put him by the corner, in charge of the guards there. Have him taken there at once, while I go and see our guest."

Mike obeyed the order, grumbling like distant thunder all the while, and Major Heyward rejoined his daughter.

He found her listening with rapt attention to Captain Richmond, who was dilating with astounding fervor upon the charms of the life of an Indian chief. According to the captain, every thing worth living for was comprised in this life, and civilization had no charms to compare with it. Major Heyward listened to this rhapsody with some amusement. He looked on the young captain, from what he had seen of him, as a headlong, talkative youth, and now he began to think that he must be also exquisitely romantic. Jealous, as he ordinarily was of his pretty daughter, he had somehow conceived a contempt for the mental caliber of the captain, that divested him in his mind of all danger to his child. Alas! Major Heyward, had you known the heart of woman when very young, you would have known that a handsome face and glib tongue like that of Captain Richmond, make swift advances on the too-susceptible bosoms of young girls. Blanche had been fascinated by the dexterity and powers of Richmond in the first place, and now his handsome face and ready tongue were fast completing the conquest. She seemed to be drinking in every word as Richmond enthusiastically exclaimed :

"Ah, Miss Heyward, I shall never forget the looks of that chief, nor the seemingly-perfect happiness he enjoyed. With all the polished manners and learning of a well-educated gentleman, for he had been one, this haughty young Frenchman had become an Apache chief, and gloried in that title far more than in being Count Montriche. He had completely severed himself from his European kindred, and become an idealized Indian. He lives in the Sierra Madre, in the north of Mexico, and rules as absolutely over the States of Chihuahua and Durango, by right of the sword, as Cæsar over

Gaul. I saw him but once; when the chief of the Apaches came to a conference at Fort Churchill, and I was wonderfully impressed with his appearance. But what I heard of him is like a fairy tale. They say that in his desert home he has more horses, and of greater speed and beauty, than the greatest nobles of England or France, with abundance of gold and jewels, and—pardon me—a harem of the most beautiful girls that were ever seen, who are rolling in luxury all the time, even in the heart of Sierra Madre."

The major laughed aloud.

"Oh, come, captain, you're stretching that story a little. We've seen Indian girls before. Some of them are passably pretty, but there's not a beautiful face among them. How does he procure all this harem?"

"Partly from the wilder Indians, who are prettier than you think," said the young officer, laughing, "and partly from Mexico and the United States. You may stare, sir, but they say that whenever Montriche hears of a very beautiful girl, either in New Orleans or Mexico, French or Spanish, he sends for her at once, and always succeeds in getting her."

"But how wicked!" said Blanche, in a tone of horror. "How wretched the poor creatures must be, forced into this wretch's harem!"

"On the contrary, Miss Heyward, they seem to be perfectly happy," said Richmond. "Montriche has turned Mormon, they say, for he certainly keeps his girls in better order than most married men do their single wives, and however they may talk at first, they always end by loving him devotedly. At least so those say who know him, and have seen some of his wives."

"Horrible!" exclaimed Blanche. "I'm glad I'm not one of his wives."

"You may be yet," said Captain Richmond, with a lurking smile. "If Montriche knew you were here I certainly would not give much for your chances of escape. And let me tell you, Miss Heyward, that you would in time become reconciled even to that, for Montriche, they say, is one of the most affectionate of men, and never fails to make a woman love him in time."

"I think we had better drop that subject, if you please, captain," said the major, dryly. "It's not very improving for young girls. I see that our cook has our supper ready, and we shall be pleased to see you join us. In twenty minutes more we must put out the lights, or your friends outside might shoot some of us in the dark."

Captain Richmond started.

"*My* friends outside, major! What do you mean?"

"Well, then, your enemies," the major answered, laughing; "the fellows that gave you such a lively brush, *I* mean. We must be careful to-night, for 'tis our first camp in dangerous places, and we have a very precious jewel to protect."

And he placed his arm caressingly on his daughter's shoulder.

"Indeed, major, you can't wonder at others coveting the jewel," said Richmond, gayly. "A man who brings such jewels into the wilderness must look well to his weapons and his wood-craft, or he may chance to find himself minus the jewel and his scalp, some fine morning."

"I take the risk," said Heyward, confidently. "Let me see the Indian cunning enough to steal either. Come—come; supper waits."

CHAPTER VII.

THE EXODUS.

ON the same day at evening of which the Hewardys were camping in the valley of the Mogallon range, on their guard against a half-suspected danger, a remarkable cavalcade was issuing from the lonely valley that surrounds the Tree of Death. This cavalcade consisted of the Hartstein and Burton families, accompanied by Gerald Leigh, who seemed to have become a fixture in the household for the time being. The seven giants of the Hartstein tribe, with Sextus Burton and Leigh, rode in the advance. The Hartsteins and Burtons were magnificently mounted on horses bred between the mus-

tang of the south-east—a pure barb—and the large horse of the States. In their former flight from the avenging Danites, years ago, Gerald learned, the fugitives had succeeded in saving two entire horses, which they had crossed on captured mustangs in the course of a year, with the usual good results. Eight ponderous wagons, as neat and strong as Brother Burton and Hartstein could make them, lumbered behind, with the family effects and the innumerable children, and their teams were perhaps the queerest part of the caravan, consisting of six mighty bisons each. The tame jaguars followed the wagons, attached by their chains, as meekly as so many dogs; and Katrina Hartstein, magnificent as ever in her regal beauty, presided over the menagerie, mounted on a large iron-gray horse, and armed with her long whip.

They emerged from the deserted crater on the north side, and struck off to the west, led by Fritz Hartstein, the general guide of the party.

The only one of the crowd possessing fire-arms fit for use was Gerald Leigh. The rest had exhausted their ammunition years before, and, as father Hartstein said :

"The iron and steel were too precious to us to be left idle. So we beat it into swords and arrow-heads; and we find that, with some more trouble, they answer our purpose just as well, Mr. Leigh. My sons are all good swordsmen and archers, and we thus have made good account of Indian war-parties, by observing the rule always to charge home, where a sword is as good as a pistol."

Fritz Hartstein appeared to know the way well. The table-land, covered with bowlders lying in loose sand, rose gradually to the north and west, toward an arid chain of mountains, deserted by man and beast alike, through whose fastnesses, twenty-five years before, the fugitives had made their escape from Brigham's "Destroying Angels," or "Danites." The way was rugged and dreary, and, as Adolph Hartstein informed Gerald, they would find no water till the next day at sunset.

"It took us a day's hard riding, with no weight on our horses, when I came this way a year ago," he said; "and the wagons don't go more than half the speed we did, although our buffaloes walk better than oxen."

"How in the world did you ever contrive to tame those creatures?" asked Gerald. "I thought they were intractable."

"They are hard to manage," Adolph admitted. "But Brother Burton was an old hand at breaking oxen down East, and he managed it at last. We began by driving out buffalo calves, years ago, and they were pretty easy to manage at first. They bred in our valley, and their calves were tamed again. Brother Burton told us that he had seen the thing done in Illinois once or twice, and what has been done can be done again, you know."

"How old were you when you first came to this valley?" asked Gerald.

"I was only about two years old, and my wife was a baby in arms," said Adolph. "Fritz, there, was five years old, and his wife about three. My father and Brother Burton were at that time devout believers in the Book of Mormon, before they began to inculcate polygamy; but when that idea was started both took fright. My mother was a very beautiful girl in those days, and the prophet, Joe Smith"—here the young man lowered his voice—"cast his eyes upon her, and one day announced that it was revealed to him that Sister Hartstein must be sealed to him.

"That opened my father's eyes, and Brother Burton, who had been suspicious for some time that all was not right, proposed to him that they should flee to the south-west. At that time the Mormons were resting in Kansas, having been driven out from Illinois, and were preparing to make war against their neighbors of the Gentiles. My father and Brother Burton fled in the night time with their families—we were only five children then, all told—and succeeded in crossing the border, and reaching the Rocky Mountains before the pursuers, the terrible *Danites*, came up. They caught us at last in a rocky pass of the mountains, and would have slain us all except my poor mother perhaps, but for the heroism of one man, my father's brother, Diederich Hartstein. Alone and unaided he covered the retreat, killed four out of the seven Danites with his pistols and rifle, and wounded two of the others before they overpowered him, and finally was killed, scalped and cut in pieces by the monsters, with all the

ferocity of savages. But the remaining three, one of whom was mortally wounded, were too few to follow us, and only one escaped by the speed of his horse from my father and Brother Burton. They knew that he would probably seek assistance and return, so that they had no time to rest. Digging a hasty grave for poor uncle Diederich, they pursued their journey through unknown passes of the mountains in desperate haste, pushing forward, as they thought, for California, but missed their way, struggling on over this very track expecting daily to perish, and finally, by the providence of God, reached that happy valley where we have remained ever since."

"You had a terrible time of it," said Gerald, gravely. "I don't wonder that you were all unwilling to leave that valley. Indeed, if I were you, I would never have come away at all. You can never be happier or possess more real comfort, go where you will."

"What would you have?" said Adolph, gayly. "In a restless moment Fritz and I started off on a hunt to the eastern plains, and came across the remains of a wagon that had been robbed by Indians and burned. We brought away the only thing left, an old soiled fashion book, and ever since that the girls have been all agog to see the world. We will see it, and if we don't like it, we can always come back, you know."

"Perhaps not," said Gerald. "You must remember that there are Indians on the road. In fact, we shall probably have trouble to reach California as it is. Do you know the mountains? I confess I do not."

"Fritz and I have traveled all over within a circle of three hundred miles," said Adolph. "We have looked down at Santa Fe and Albuquerque, but never felt any desire to visit them, they looked so miserable. But since you have told us what a splendid place is San Francisco, we have all made up our minds to see that at least. We shall find no Indians hereabouts, till we get to the Mogallon Mountains. Then we enter the Navahoe and Apache country, and we shall have to be careful."

"What would you do, for instance, were you attacked by Indians now?" asked Gerald, curiously.

"Corral the wagons, put the beasts in the center, and

charge them with Katrina and the jaguars," replied Adolph, coolly.

"Katrina!" exclaimed Gerald, amazed. "What! would you allow your sister to expose her life to those monsters?"

"She would not stay behind long," said Adolph. "Besides, she has made it her business to tame those jaguars since they were cubs, and the sight of them always frightens the Indians. I remember once when she insisted on going on a scout with us, how we made a large war-party of Apaches run without firing a shot, simply by letting the jaguars loose and cheering them on. The Indians thought the king of beasts was coming, and we never saw them afterward."

"I don't wonder," said Gerald, smiling. "I remember what a fright, they gave me, even when they were chained up."

"It was very lucky they were," said Adolph, "or you might have been eaten up in very short order. If ever our jaguars do taste blood, I fancy Katrina will have hard work to keep them in order."

"Don't you believe it," said the clear, mellow tones of Katrina herself, who had ridden up near them unnoticed. "They know me for their mistress now, and you shall see them continue in just such order as long as I keep my head clear, and this whip retains its power. I don't fear them, and they fear me."

Gerald Leigh looked with involuntary admiration upon the high-spirited girl, and then suddenly started and turned away his head. The memory of his engagement to Blanche Heyward pricked him like a knife, for he felt that his faith to her was waxing weaker, the longer he remained in Katrina's company. He did not even dare to be civil to the latter, and put on an air of coldness and restraint whenever she approached, that was very foreign to his real feelings, and which somewhat surprised the frank girl herself, who was quite unacquainted with the ways of the world. Gerald Leigh had met Blanche Heyward a year or two before on the great farm or ranche of her father, where Major Heyward—a retired regular officer—lived like a prince. Gerald had fallen desperately in love with, and been thoughtlessly accepted by giddy, spoiled Blanche, but when they came to ask the major's consent, it had been sternly refused, except on one condition.

"Mr. Leigh," he said, "I was once a poor lieutenant, and married in haste. My wife and myself repented in poverty at leisure, and she died when Blanche was a baby. My daughter shall never suffer as I did. You are poor, sir. You can not have my daughter till you have shown that you can place her in a home as comfortable as she comes from. Go and seek your fortune then. When you have found it you may claim Blanche, if both are of the same mind still. Till then you must never see each other."

And Blanche and Gerald were forced to acquiesce, the former taking the matter very coolly, for she had but little depth of feeling. And Gerald had been wandering about ever since, seeking his fortune in locating a mine, till he stumbled by accident on the Valley of the Crater.

And that was the state of matters with Gerald when his party went into camp, not fifty miles from Major Heyward's camp in the Mogallon Mountains.

CHAPTER VIII.

• A NIGHT ATTACK.

THE miners' camp in the Mogallon Valley was buried in slumber under the silent starlight. The only people stirring were the eight guards at the angles of the corral, one of whom stood sentry over the Apache prisoner.

The latter, still helplessly bound, seemed to have resigned himself to his fate with the stoicism of his race, for his heavy breathing told of his slumbers.

"Golly, Jack," muttered the sentry to his comrade, "this here guard-duty ain't what it's cracked up to be. The major, he seems to think as we're in the army, he keeps so many of us on duty. Wonder what time it is. 'Bout time for the relief, ain't it?"

"Guess it orter," was the glum response. "Wish them Injuns 'ud come ef they're a-comin'. It's e'na'most as bad as bein' killed to be kept on the stretch all the time, without knowin' what's up. Who's this cuss a-comin'?"

He alluded to a figure that was slowly approaching from the inside of the corral to where they were, stepping very softly, as if fearful of awaking the sleepers around.

"It's that darned popinjay officer, with his shoulder-straps," growled the inside sentry. "What does the government mean, I wouder, by sending out sich fellers to lord it over better men?"

The miner, like most Americans of the lower classes, especially out West, had a great contempt for the refinements of civilization, and looked on politeness as "putting on airs."

"Guess *he* don't know much about the mountains," responded his comrade. "He's a game cuss, though, ye can't deny that. He heeled over this here Apache, pretty, didn't he?"

"So, so," answered the first, reluctantly. "What does he want now?"

At this moment the form of Captain Richmond approached close to them, and the sharp, clear tones of his voice, contrasting forcibly with the uncouth growls of the two miners, broke in on their conversation.

"Boys," he said, "if you'll take the advice of a man who's seen a good deal of service, you'll look sharp. The Indians are creeping in upon you. *I can hear them.*"

The outside sentry, Jack Maddox by name, started incredulously.

"You must hev darned good ears, then, mister," he answered. "I've been on post afore this, and I reckin my ears ain't deaf, and I hain't heard nothing yet."

"My ears *are* good," said Richmond, quietly. "So are my eyes. I see a man lying by that log yonder, now. Do you?"

Both Maddox and his companion peered eagerly in the direction indicated, where a fallen cottonwood lay on the grass, but neither could distinguish any thing. Maddox observed, jeeringly:

"Guess your eyes are *too* good, mister officer. You kin see what no one else kin. Ther bean't no man thar."

"Lend me your rifle and I'll show you there is," said the captain. "You mountain lads take a good deal of proof, but I'll show you that an Indian *is* lying there, and that there

are others creeping in all round. Will you lend me your rifle?"

"For one shot, yes," said Maddox, willingly enough. "But you can't hit any thing in such a dark night."

"I can scare him, anyway," said the strange officer, coolly. "Now watch and see if I don't."

As he spoke, he took the rifle from Maddox's hand, and poised it carefully.

The two miners looked eagerly out at the fallen log, and watched for the effect of the shot.

The instant their attention was off the prisoner, the latter might have been seen to raise his head and look all round. Then he dropped, and began to roll himself slowly toward the wheels of the nearest wagon, apparently as if turning in his sleep. Neither of his guards noticed it, for the captain was talking to them.

"Yes, boys," he said; "you're not the first who have been deceived in me. I have better eyesight and hearing than nine men out of ten, and I've had more practice than yon think on these mountains. Now then, you watch. I can see an Indian lying flat on his face, in the shadow of the log. I don't know how your rifle shoots, and I can't see the sights very plain, but I can put a bullet near enough to scare him, at all events. Now!"

As he spoke, he leveled the rifle on the tail-board of the wagon, and fired. The result of the shot was astounding.

Up from the very spot he had mentioned leaped a naked Indian, in his war-paint, and up, in all directions round, leaped a circle of similar figures.

The whole camp was roused in a moment, as the Indians, with a furious yell, came tearing on. Crack went the rifles of the guards occupying the corners of the corral, and shouts and yells arose from all quarters.

Several shots came from the darkness without, in answer, and then came a rattling fire from the miners who poured out from their sleeping-places, weapon in hand. Captain Richmond distinguished himself by his coolness, calling to the miners to stand fast against their foes, and Major Heyward came running from his bed to superintend, finding himself attacked sooner than he anticipated.

For some minutes all was confusion, and the surprised miners saw themselves surrounded, and several Indians trying to creep in under the wagons. Then recollection returned, and with a fierce volley, they drove their enemies back, who instantly disappeared as quickly as they had come, and every thing was again as still as death outside the wagons.

But within the clamor raged louder than ever for a few minutes, till it was quelled by the stentorian voice of Major Heyward, roaring :

"To your beds, every one of you! Guards on post, and shut up your noise! Do you think that's all the trouble we shall have, you fools?"

And in a very little time the miners had returned to their couches, where they lay down on their arms, and quiet was restored.

Then Major Heyward came up to Captain Richmond, and observed :

"Upon my soul, captain, you fired that shot just in time, and they tell me you must have wonderfully good eyesight to see those fellows creeping up. Where's that prisoner that Maddox was watching?"

Then Maddox himself started, and looked down at the place where his charge had been.

The Indian was gone!

How he had contrived to unbind himself was at first a mystery, but the mystery was in a measure solved by finding the cut remains of the cords lying by the wagon-wheels, showing that the prisoner must by some means or other have become possessed of a knife. How, when, or where he got it, and how he contrived to cut his bonds unperceived, was as puzzling as ever. That once done, the confusion of the attack offered him an easy chance to escape, of which he had availed himself with characteristic quickness.

Mike Johnson was very silent and important on that subject.

"Never you mind, young feller," he said to one of the miners, who was asking him how he thought the Indian got off. "I know'd the cuss wouldn't stay when he come in. *He* warn't hurt much."

And nothing else could be got out of Mike on the subject by any of his comrades. When Major Heyward called for him he went readily enough, and found Captain Richmond and Blanche seated with him, the three discussing the attack, and the captain narrating, with his usual eager, rapid manner, the way in which he had foiled it.

"I felt in my heart that we should be attacked to-night," he was saying; "and something kept me from sleeping. And as I lay awake, with my head near the ground, I could hear those sounds that no one else could. I heard the noise of men creeping through the grass, and I thought that I would get up and warn the sentries. You know sentries will sleep, major. I was just in time, for when I got there I saw the devils creeping in all round, and knew from their manner that they meant mischief. Your fellows must have been blind not to see them, major."

"And yet Jack Maddox is counted to be the best look-out in the camp," said the major. "I can't account for your seeing them so well and his being so blind. What do you think, Mike?"

Mike Johnson sniffed dubiously before he answered.

"I reckin Jack Maddox kin see as fur as most folks through a mile-stone, major. But it's 'stonishin' what folks kin see as knows what's thar afore they looks."

"What do you mean, sir?" demanded Richmond, sharply. "Explain yourself this instant, if you don't want my riding-whip over your shoulders."

"Not by a darned sight, Mister Captain," said Mike, sturdily. "You ain't among the reg'lars now, whar they treats men like dogs—"

"Silence, Mike," broke in the deep voice of Major Heyward. "You forget who's here, sir."

"I knows very well that you're here, sir, and that Miss Blanche is here," said Mike, sulkily; "but I ain't no dog, fur to be threatened with a whip, I ain't. And I say ag'in, that them as knows what's thar afore they looks is very apt to be uncommon sharp of eyesight, they is, and if Mister Captain wants to know how that 'ere Injun got loose, I guess he kin answer his own question. I ain't a-goin' to speak no more."

And entirely forgetting his usual respect, the indignant

hunter turned his back and stalked away, muttering all the time.

Captain Richmond burst out into a laugh as he went.

"Well, major," he said, "I've heard of obstinate old men taking notions into their heads, but this old fellow beats all. Is he crazy?"

"Very nearly, I do believe," said Blanche, eagerly. "I've told papa ever so often how obstinate and stupid he is, and how he ought to get rid of him; but he will keep him till he insults some of our best friends. It's a shame, papa! Here is Captain Richmond, who has saved us all from being murdered asleep, and this ungrateful old wretch throws out horrid sneers at him, and tries to make us believe I don't know what. I wish he was away out of here."

"So do I, most devoutly, Miss Heyward," said Richmond, politely. "I fear that he will succeed in making you believe me a terrible creature, after all."

"Indeed, no," said Blanche, earnestly. "No one could make me believe that of you, Captain Richmond, much less obstinate old Mike. Papa, I wish you'd send him away. He's a positive nuisance."

Major Heyward made no answer. He seemed to be cogitating deeply, and Blanche forgot all about it and went on with her chat with the handsome captain, entirely unmindful of the lateness of the hour and of the proximity of that enemy which had but a short time before shown itself so enterprising and audacious.

CHAPTER IX.

THE QUEEN OF THE JAGUARS.

AT evening of the next day the Hartstein caravan had passed over the second stage of their arid journey, and drew up at last in a delightful green valley, on the very border-line of Arizona, if they had known it. But parallels of latitude and meridians of longitude, the boundaries of our Western Territories, leave no visible traces behind them; and it is not

at all surprising, therefore, that our party was in blissful ignorance of its whereabouts, and only glad to find themselves close to grass and water, when their stock was nearly out. Thanks to the German forethought of the party, they had carried a large supply of water with them, and the tame bisons had proved much more proof against fatigue and thirst than oxen could have been. When they halted and went into camp, therefore, all the animals were in good condition, and only hungry enough to enjoy the feast of nature spread before them.

"To morrow, if I mistake not, we shall see the Indians," remarked Fritz Hartstein, as they sat around the fire, at sunset. "There are no sign near here, but we can not go much further without meeting them in the country ahead. I've been through it before now, and know the way well. We had better start at daylight, or an hour before, if we can. Since we are going toward civilization we had better get near it as soon as possible, to be protected from the Indians, for we must remember that they have guns and we have none."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when they heard the faint, far-off sound of a rifle-shot, followed at a short interval by several more, close together. How far off they were it was impossible to say. In that clear atmosphere, and with the assistance of the mountain echoes, it might have been any distance from one to ten miles. Every one was on his feet in a moment, listening intently, but the sound was not repeated. Whatever the fight was about, it was probably already over.

Father Hartstein looked grave and troubled.

"I told you how it would be, girls," he said. "As long as we were in our quiet valley we heard no sounds of strife. We leave it, and the first that we hear of the outside world is that men are killing each other."

"I, for one, vote that we go back," said Brother Burton. "It is not too late, and we know what we have to expect if we go forward."

"For shame!" cried Katrina Hartstein, her blue eyes flashing scornfully. "Did we not come out, determined to go through to San Francisco? We knew that the way there was dangerous; nevertheless, we ought to go through as we

determined. What are a few distant shots to us? I, for one, am ready to go out now with brother Fritz to see what the matter is, and then we shall know what we have to fear."

"I'll go," said Fritz. "Mr. Leigh will come with us, I hope, for his fire-arms may be needed. Will you come, Leigh?"

"Certainly," said Gerald, rising. "Mr. Hartstein, keep your caravan together, while we are gone, and if I were you I would extinguish the fires soon, for there is no telling who may be about."

The little camp was all in a bustle very soon, preparing for defense. The three explorers, Fritz, Gerald and Katrina, were soon in their saddles, leaving to the rest the task of defending their camp. Gerald felt a strange beating of the heart, as he rode out for the first time side by side with the beautiful Amazon, and directly associated with her. Katrina wore a sword as long and as heavy as was owned by any of her brothers, and Gerald had often seen her beat Adolph at singlestick. Girl as she was, she was fitter than many a man to go out on an expedition like the present, involving much risk and very probable danger. But the most formidable part of Katrina's preparations was not in herself. The seven jaguars, of all sizes, followed her closely, six chained together in couples, and the last one, the oldest of all, gamboling like a kitten round the horses' feet. Gerald had grown used to them by this time, and felt no fear; but he could not restrain a thrill of admiration as he saw the complete control in which the fierce creatures were held by their young queen, obeying every motion of her long whip as completely as well-broken dogs.

"Come, Fritz, away!" she cried, and rode out of camp, followed by her spotted pets, and accompanied by Gerald and her brother.

They were soon out of the little valley, and lost sight of the fires behind them, while the noises of the camp died away to an inaudible hum. Then Fritz led the way up a rocky pass, which climbed over a neighboring spur of the mountains, and led in the direction in which they thought they had heard firing. For some time they rode briskly on in silence, the jaguars bounding along as noiselessly as ghosts

around the horses, till they had galloped for nearly half an hour. Then there was a sudden scurrying and scratching, like a troop of startled cats, and every jaguar simultaneously began to snarl and spit.

Katrina pulled up her horse on its haunches with a jerk.

"Halt!" she whispered, in low tones; "they scent strangers, and very near us."

She snapped her whip once, a sharp crack, and instantly every one of the fierce creatures slunk peacefully to her feet, and lay silent. Gerald's bay stallion suddenly began to neigh aloud, and before the young man could grasp him by the nostrils, the hail was echoed from the far distance by an answering neigh.

"Horsemen, by heavens! Indians they must be," said Fritz Hartstein, in a low, excited tone. "Keep your beast still if you can, Leigh. We don't know how many there are."

Gerald was already on his feet and by Lightfoot's side, his hand firmly closed on the horse's nostrils, and the whole party listened intently. They could hear the trampling of horses, but whether it was coming toward them or not, they could not at first tell. After listening awhile, they made out that the sound was indeed approaching, and at a rapid pace too, while the indistinct clatter of voices in loud tones was equally audible.

"Get ready, Leigh. Here they come," said Fritz Hartstein, drawing his sword. "Never mind the horse. They've heard him plain enough, or they wouldn't make such a noise. They're Apaches. I know their calls."

Gerald mounted without more ado, and his horse began to neigh louder than ever. A wild yell came from the darkness ahead, and then they heard the clatter of hoofs at full speed.

But as it came nearer, another fact became plain, even in the darkness.

The sound was *below them*.

As Gerald realized it he dashed in his spurs, and checked his horse so sharply with the curb that the pain compelled the animal to cease neighing.

Then it became plain that the horsemen were on some

other pass below the one they occupied, and that they were safe for the present, unless the others could come up the face of the mountain.

But as the shadowy troop of horsemen passed by, Lightfoot must needs utter another neigh, and instantly there was a confused clash and clatter below, and a voice shouted :

*“ Morblcu ! Ou diable est ce sacré cheval ?”**

Gerald was astounded.

He thought that Indians were below him, and here was a voice speaking perfectly pure French, with the accent of an educated person !

Hardly believing his ears, he was next surprised at a Babel of voices in broken Spanish and French, with guttural unknown words that he guessed to be Apache, all talking together in great confusion.

Then the voice in French, which he had first heard, shouted again :

“ Silence ! Sacr-r-r-r-r-é tête de cochon ! Silence !”

And instantly silence ensued.

Gerald strained his eyes and ears in all directions.

The little party of three stood on a broad ledge on the mountain side, with a steep slope on either hand, one going up, the other down. By looking down they could see, or fancy they saw, the forms of men and horses on another ledge, a little below them, with a very steep slope, inaccessible for horses, between them.

Every now and then the stamp of a hoof in the darkness assisted them in locating the position of the group on the lower ledge, but what the intentions of the party were was uncertain. Gerald wondered whether he himself and his companions could be seen, and what was to come of the meeting, when the same sharp, rapid voice hailed them from below, in English this time, crying :

“ Who are you up there ? Answer or we fire !”

Gerald cocked his rifle but made no answer.

As the faint click rung out on the night air, it was answered from below by another, and the flash of a rifle followed. Dark as the night was, the bullet whistled close to Gerald's ears, showing that the party below must have un-

* “Where the dickens is that brute of a horse ?”

commonly fine eyesight. In that momentary flash, Gerald caught sight of a dark group of painted Indians gazing up at him, and then came the most wonderful occurrence of the night. Out of the darkness at the bottom of the rocks came a voice which uttered a startled cry of—

“ GERALD LEIGH !”

The next moment the broad glare of a blue light flashed out in the darkness, and illuminated the group below. There, in the midst of a crowd of Indians and bandit-looking Mexicans, Gerald beheld two faces that stamped themselves on his memory for many a long day after.

The one was that of a keen-looking, handsome white man, with glistening black eyes and mustache, dressed in some strange picturesque fashion, such as he had never before seen.

The other was that of his own betrothed bride, Blanche Heyward !

There she was, seated on the croup of a magnificent horse, which was spotted like a jaguar, and she was clasped around the waist by the very white man who spoke French, and was the evident commander of the party. But before Gerald could collect his scattered senses to realize it all, a second shot, this time better aimed, from the pistol of the Frenchman, cut through his hat and grazed his head. Then he heard Blanche shriek, and saw her throw her arms round the stranger, crying :

“ Don’t ! don’t ! for my sake !”

But almost at the same moment the light went out, and he heard the clear tones of Katrina Hartstein crying :

“ At them, my children ; tear them to pieces !”

Then there was a great scratching and growling, as the fierce jaguars, obedient to their mistress’ call, leaped on the throng of horsemen below. What took place in that darkness he could not tell, but roars and growls, shrieks of agony from man and beast, and the wild trampling of hoofs, lasted for several minutes ; and then there was a general stampede below, and the sound of hoofs at wild speed was heard fainter and fainter in the distance.

Katrina put her whistle to her lips and sounded her recall to the beasts. “ I think that the queen of the jaguars has gained a victory,” was all she said.

CHAPTER X.

THE STORY OF A RENEGADE.

THE morning dawned over the miners' camp and found its occupants all prepared to move. Major Heyward had consulted Mike Johnson, and that worthy had advised him to move out of the valley and travel on during the day.

"Yer see thur's twenty-eight on us, all told, major," said the hunter, "without countin' this here stranger, as mout be wuth summat in a scrimmage, ef a body c'u'd depend on him. But them sopers ain't what thur cracked up to be, ef they ain't got backin' of thur own sort. Leastwise that's what I've allers found 'em. Well, major, thur ain't over forty of the varmints on the trail arter us, and they b'longs to two different bands. They won't dar' to fight us in broad daylight, and ef we keep our train clost together, with a line of good fellers on each side, I'll defy the Black Painter himself to git us, with all his devilish tricks."

"The Black Painter, Mike! Who is he?" asked the major, surprised.

"He's a born devil, major, that's what *he* is," said the hunter, gloomily.

"But *what* is he, Mike? I never heard his name before."

"Ef ye'd traveled these hyar mountings, year in and year out, as I hev, ye'd know him too well, major. He's a runnigade."

"A renegade! What, a white man who has joined the Indians?"

"That's jest him, major. Some says he's a Britisher, some a Frencher, some a Mexican, but we all knows one thing, he's a devil."

"And why do they call him the Black Painter, Mike? Is he black? Is he an artist?"

"No, no, major, not that kind o' painter. They calls him so, 'count of a skin he wears fur a saddle-cloth, the skin of a black painter, as the Greasers calls a jaguar. Thur ain't

many of that kind, so nigh black as that, but he managed to kill one, and they calls him arter the skin. He's the chief of a band up in the Sierra Madre, and they say he does more mischief than all the rest of the 'Pash together. Ginerally, he keeps over the Rio Grande, but sometimes he comes to the States prospectin' arter gals. He's death on female critters, he is. They say he's got as many gals as old Brigham himself, and every one has a lodge of her own."

"Why, this must be that Frenchman that Captain Richmond told us of," said the major, thoughtfully. "He seems to be well known in the Arizona forts. By heavens, if I meet him, he's stolen his last woman, the infamous wretch!"

"Does that 'ere cappen know him too?" asked Mike, curiously.

"Yes, he says his real name is Montriche."

"Wal, I swow!" said Mike, and then he relapsed into silence for several minutes.

Then he roused up briskly, saying:

"Come, major, we'd best be off. We'll git to the valley as I told ye of, by sunset, ef we're smart, and thur we can defy Black Painter and all his imps, while we're a-washin' out gold and silver. I guess you'll say 'twar wuth comin' to, when ye see it."

"Get ready then, Mike," said the major, and he went back to the camp-table by the fire, where Blanche was already waiting breakfast for her father and their guest.

To explain Mike's last observation, it is necessary to say that he was now guiding the party toward a valley remarkably rich in "placers," which he claimed to have discovered some years before, when on a scout or hunt, alone. Major Heyward, knowing Mike's exceptional character for truthfulness, had organized the expedition entirely on his information, and they were now supposed to be within an easy march of the promised Golden Valley.

The major was silent and thoughtful at breakfast. He was thinking over the stories he had heard of the Black Panther, and anxious and uneasy as to the safety of his wilful daughter, Blanche, tempting prize as he knew her to be to such a man, were he in the vicinity. Blanche rallied him on his silence, but without avail, and the meal became

silent, not to say gloomy. Not a trace of an Indian was to be seen outside in the daylight, and the teams were hitched up, and Blanche had mounted her pony, before the major had recovered from his abstraction.

Then, just as the column of march was forming, he suddenly addressed Captain Richmond, saying :

“ Captain, a word with you apart.”

The officer, with a smile of well-bred courtesy, mingled with faint surprise, and some reluctance to leave the deep flirtation he was evidently engaged in with Blanche, bowed, and went aside with his host, when he stood waiting to be addressed.

“ Captain,” said the major, abruptly, “ you seem to be much fascinated with my daughter.”

“ Indeed, major, no one can see her long and fail to be that,” said the captain, with a smile.

“ Very good, sir. I have not known you long, but you are an army officer, and that is enough for me. On your word, as an officer, I ask you—do you think Black Panther is anywhere near us ?”

Captain Richmond started.

“ Black Panther ! why, that’s Montriche’s Indian name.”

“ Exactly, sir. I heard you say you had seen him at one of the forts. Have you any reason to suspect that he is here now ? If I thought it, I would return to California at once. Better lose all I have invested in this expedition than run the risk of exposing Blanche to be captured by the wretch. I ought not to have let her come, but she over-persuaded me, and I thought that a party as large as ours was safe anywhere.”

Captain Richmond was silent for a minute.

When he looked up a covert smile played on his mustached lip, as he answered :

“ Whether Black Panther is around or not, I can not tell you, major ; but this I know. I don’t fear Black Panther and all his band. They know me well, and they fear me too. Yesterday’s was not the first Indian fight that I’ve been in, and I’ll defy all the Indians of the mountains to take Miss Heyward from *my* care, if you choose to trust her to me. Don’t think of going back. I know where you’re go-

ing, major, for I've traveled these mountains as often as your obstinate old friend, Mike. There are riches in that valley, such as he little dreams of, and you can have them for the picking up. If you doubt it, *pick up the first shining stone you see, and look close at it.* But don't think of going back."

"And so you don't think much of the danger from this Montriche, or Black Panther?" said the major.

"Truly, no. I don't fear him. But this I will say. If Black Panther *is* near you, he has his eye on you at this minute, and going back will not save you, for they say he never lets go his prey, any more than his namesake. Go forward, and keep on the look-out. I'll warrant that you'll not be attacked to-day. Panthers are nocturnal animals, you know, and a fire scares them."

And Captain Richmond showed his white teeth in a smile, while his eyes glistened mockingly at the major.

"Then, as an officer and a gentleman, you advise me to move forward?" said the major, with deep emphasis.

"As neither could I venture to dictate to your rank and experience," said Richmond, hastily. "I only tell you that *I* would do it, and I can not take the responsibility of suggesting your movements. I am going on to my next post of duty, alone, if necessary, dead or alive. If you will lend me your escort I shall thank you deeply, but anyway, I move on."

"Then if you go I go, captain," said the major, resolutely. "I can not see an old comrade exposed to danger, on duty, if I can help him. The die is cast. We move on."

He mounted his horse, and rode to the head of the column, which was drawn up, waiting for orders.

"Forward, march," rung out his clear, powerful voice; and the four wagons, with a file of fourteen men, armed to the teeth, on each side, moved off down the valley to the western passes, the major riding at the head with the strange officer, and Blanche Heyward on the little spotted Indian pony, between the two, and under their joint protection.

Mike Johnson, grim and grizzled, bestrode a scraggy mule, and rode in the advance, keenly inspecting every turn of the pass ahead, and evidently decidedly suspicious of every thing,

and especially of the strange officer to whom he had taken such a violent dislike.

Richmond, on the other hand, seemed to take a pleasure in augmenting this dislike, by treating the other with studied contempt, much as a regular officer might be expected to treat a volunteer private who presumed to address him unasked.

The threat of the whip, moreover, which the captain had uttered the night before, rankled in Mike's breast, and assisted to foment the half-formed suspicions that filled the guide's thoughts, that all was not right.

"Ef we *do* hev a scrimmage," muttered Mike, "the fust bullet as I fires goes inter him, the ornary cuss! I'll come soger over him, darn me ef I don't."

And thus, with suspicion in front and doubt in the rear, the Heyward caravan moved slowly forward toward the wished-for valley.

CHAPTER XI.

THROWING OFF THE MASK.

THE setting sun cast its crimson glow athwart the slopes of the mountains, as the wagons of the Heywards drew up at the entrance of the loveliest valley that imagination could picture, rendered more beautiful by its contrast to the sterile sierra that surrounded it.

It lay in a species of basin, of an oval form, as if it had received the washings of the winter-torrents for myriads of years from the encircling mountains. One end of this basin was a trifle lower than the other, and permitted a small rivulet to escape toward the lower stages of mountains, after leaving the shallow lake which had collected in the midst of the valley.

Otherwise it was a dead-level, covered with water in the winter, and blooming with the rankest luxuriance in the spring and summer. As far as it extended—about five miles by three—it was covered with a vivid carpet of emerald green, span-

gled with flowers, and dotted, here and there, with dark live-oaks, standing like watching giants to guard the valley.

Around all towered the purple mountains, their bare and sterile sides now glowing in the evening sunlight, and covered with a mantle of all the hues of the rainbow, flashing from the glittering quartz crystals that incased the rocks.

"Thar, major, hyar we be," said Mike Johnson. "It are a lovely place even to look at; and the lumps of gold lie in the mud in that stream as thick as pebbles. Ef ye don't believe it, come and see."

"Wait till we get our camp fixed first," said Heyward, gravely. "It's near sunset, Mike, and the Black Panther you told us of walks at night."

"That's so, major!" said Mike. "I declare to gracious I'd forgot it a moment a-lookin' at them beautiful sights. See the deer a-scutterin' away, sir. We'd better go into camp around yonder tree, sir, I'm thinkin', and hev all the beasts safe under the branches. Thar's room for a hull regiment to keep dry."

"You're right, Mike. It's the best place I see, and there's no cover within a mile. Forward, then."

And the creaking train rolled on over the turf, the jolting of the wheels now entirely lost in the thick carpet of green turf that covered every thing.

All day long their march had been entirely uneventful, the Indians, if any were dogging them, being careful to keep out of sight. Blanche Heyward, whose spirits were always elastic, was wild for a gallop over the greensward, and as the train was in the midst of the valley, approaching the solitary tree they had selected for their camp, she suddenly struck Captain Richmond a light blow with her riding-whip, crying "Tag!" and dashed off at full speed into the center of the valley, laughing saucily.

Richmond laughed, turned his horse, and raced after her, as if accepting the challenge, while a general grin went down the file of miners plodding on foot by the wagons. Major Heyward frowned and called out:

"Blanche, for shame! Come back, child!"

But Blanche either did not hear or would not listen, for she kept on her course, looking back and laughing, her fleet pony

seeming fit to leap out of his skin, and doing his very best, mustang-like. Captain Richmond was whipping and spurring his, which every one had imagined from its make to be a very fleet animal, but it seemed now to be totally unable to keep up with the pony and light weight of Blanche, and it was evident that the captain was losing distance.

Major Heyward's horse was a large, powerful brute, fit for work, but by no means speedy. Mike Johnson's mule was slower yet, and there was not a horse in the command able to come up with Blanche's pony, so that the girl was master of the situation. But Mike Johnson, nevertheless, galloped off, crying :

" Go into camp, major. I'll stop them, ef I hev to shoot the pony."

Major Heyward, after an impatient growl, came to the conclusion that there was no immediate danger. His daughter was in plain sight, and not a soul could approach her under cover for miles. Blanche was riding in a circle, and the captain, by keeping on the inside, was gradually approaching her.

" He'll stop her before long," muttered the father ; " and I'll scold the little fool well when she comes back. I wish I'd left her on the ranche. But then that pauper, Gerald Leigh, might have run away with her before I came back. Bah ! these girls are troubles, anyhow."

And the old major proceeded to establish his camp, in the form of a square, around one of the great live-oaks, turning out the wearied animals to pasture on the luxuriant herbage of the valley, undaunted by fears of Indians, from whom they were safe for the present.

Meanwhile, Blanche continued to career about in a circle, the captain all the while gradually closing in upon her, till they approached another of the enormous live-oaks, with a spread of seventy feet of branches drooping to the ground. As they came nearer, and it became evident that the girl was going behind it, Richmond cast a hasty glance back over his shoulder.

Heyward was going into camp a good mile off, and Mike Johnson, at about half that distance, was laboring toward them on his scraggy mule.

"Now I have you!" suddenly cried the captain, with a triumphant laugh, and as he spoke, he shook his rein.

The same horse that had hitherto appeared to be unable to catch the pony, now all of a sudden developed into a racer of wonderful speed. In a dozen more bounds he was rapidly closing on Blanche, and as the two shot behind the live-oak which sheltered them from view of the camp and of Mike Johnson, Richmond dashed alongside, passed his arm around the girl's waist, and lifted her to his own saddle as lightly as if she had been a baby, when he exclaimed :

"Caught, by Jupiter! Blanche, you are mine!"

Then he pulled up short, and turned his horse's head, observing coolly :

"I think, mademoiselle, before we go further, I had better dispose of that obstinate old fool who is following us."

There was something in Richmond's manner so different from what it had been, an appearance as of constraint thrown off—the sudden insolent liberty he had taken with her was so astounding from one that she had known but a single day—that Blanche Heyward turned deadly pale, and her heart sunk within her. Then her native spirit returned to her, and she struggled violently to free herself from his embrace, crying :

"Captain Richmond, sir, how dare you? What do you take me for? Are you a gentleman? Let me down this instant."

Richmond laughed aloud.

"Nay, my little rosebud, 'twas a fair challenge you threw me, and I could not do less than take it. Blanche, you are mine, by this kiss."

And, in spite of her resistance, he kissed her again and again.

Blanche did not scream. She was too thoroughly ashamed of the position her rashness had put her in, and too much afraid of being caught by Mike Johnson. She suspected nothing, as yet, of this gallant captain, save that he was a very impudent lover, and only felt anxious to escape from his grasp before Mike could see her.

So she tried pleading.

"Oh, Captain Richmond, please let me go. I won't tell

any one what you've done, if you'll only let me down. Indeed, papa would kill us both if he knew it now. Let me off, and I promise to behave like a lady. Indeed I was very foolish to provoke you so, but I *thought*" (bitterly) "that you were a perfect gentleman."

Richmond laughed and retained his hold.

"I have too great a respect for your estimable papa to think of provoking him to kill me," he said, coolly. "His nature is too open and unsuspicious to be an enemy to mine. But that obstinate, insolent old hunter has come too near the truth with regard to me to permit him to go abroad. I must settle him first."

"What do you mean? Who are you?" asked Blanche, in undefined terror.

"One who adores you," said Richmond, boldly. "Blanche Heyward, either you promise to be mine, or I carry you off this instant into the wilderness, and no one shall ever see you or me again."

Blanche turned deadly pale, and her eyes dilated as she looked up into the piercing black orbs of the stranger. Evidently something strange was hidden under his manner. Before she could realize what it was, the sound of hoofs, in a lumbering gallop, came round the edge of the tree, and Mike Johnson came up, with his old mule in a lather, and pulled up alongside of them, saying, in a tone of concentrated rage:

"So, Mister Officer, what do yer mean by handlin' my young lady in that style? Let her go, gawl darn ye, or—"

He raised his rifle as he spoke and covered the other.

Richmond laughed again, and swung over the light form of Blanche Heyward to cover himself from the shot.

"Fire away, pig-head," was all he deigned to say.

Mike ground his teeth, lowered the rifle and rushed at the horse's head, which he seized by the bridle.

"Put her down, ye white-livered cur," he growled. "Are ye afeard to fight an honest man, and hide behind a gal's body?"

"No!" suddenly shouted Richmond.

As he spoke, quick as lightning, he drew from his breast a small Derringer pistol and fired straight into the hunter's fore-

head, almost touching him. Poor Mike Johnson never spoke a word, but dropped from his mule to the ground as suddenly as a slaughtered ox, as the other calmly blew the powder-smoke from the muzzle of his pistol, and observed :

" Dead men tell no tales. You might have died in your bed, my friend, if you had minded your own business. Now, mademoiselle, since our business is concluded, we will depart, if you please. My horse is perfectly competent to carry double, when the extra weight is a charming girl like yourself."

And replacing the pistol in his breast, without deigning a glance at the fallen hunter, the captain turned his horse and rode away up the valley, carefully keeping the tree between him and the camp.

Blanche was quiet now. A dreadful sinking fear oppressed her, and she struggled no more. They rode on at an easy canter for some minutes, and finding herself gently treated by the mysterious captain, she found courage to ask, faintly :

" Who are you, sir, and what are you going to do with me?"

For all answer the captain took off his cap, twitted off a wig of short brown curls, and allowed a profusion of hair, black as the raven's wing, and long and silky as a woman's, to escape and flow down over his shoulders.

Then he clasped the slight form of the girl in his arms, and looking down into her eyes with his own magnetic orbs, said :

" You are my white rose, my queen, my own, and I am MONTRICHE, THE BLACK PANTHER, KING OF THE APACHES!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE BLACK PANTHER.

FOR a few moments Blanche Heyward almost lost her senses in the revulsion of feeling at the discovery. Then, as if by a sudden inspiration, she writhed free from his arms ere he suspected her intention, and fell to the ground on the soft

turf, just as the sun set. Her abductor only laughed as he saw her rise to her feet and try to run away. He wheeled his horse round by the pressure of the legs alone, dropping the reins, and came alongside in two bounds, running in front and round her, so as effectually to cut her off from escape. The poor girl threw herself under the horse's feet, trying to kill herself, but the sagacious animal would not tread upon her, and the Black Panther, Montriche (as he must be called), remained looking down on her and laughing.

"My prize is obstinate," he called out. "They all are at first, but I break them in at last so that they love me to distraction. The Black Panther loves a fierce mate, and you are his chosen queen, my Blanche. Come, rise up. I will not harm you. I love you too much. For your sake, I will not even harm your father. But you *must* be my queen, Blanche Heyward, willingly or unwillingly. Ha! they have found me out at last, have they?"

His last exclamation was caused by looking toward the major's camp.

Blanche, in her first frantic endeavor to escape, had run to one side, so as to be in full view of the camp, and now the people there had evidently begun to suspect something wrong.

They could not have heard the pistol-shot, for the wind was blowing the wrong way, and the charge was very light.

What, then, had alarmed them?

It was the sight of the spotted pony coming riderless into camp, followed by Mike Johnson's scraggy mule!

Already Major Heyward, spurring his big brown horse to frantic efforts, was coming full speed over the green turf toward them, leaving the camp to the guards. The major was waving his hat frantically to them to stop, and they could hear his voice shouting something unintelligible, but he seemed to have no suspicion of the real state of things, seeing the false Richmond halted and gazing at something on the ground.

It was evident that he thought an accident had happened, and his daughter had been thrown and hurt.

The Black Panther took in all this at a glance, and then his countenance settled into an expression of grim, pitiless resolution.

The sharp, clear tones of his voice pierced the air like a knife as he said :

" Blanche Heyward, get up this instant, or it will be the worse for you."

The girl lay crouched up where she had fallen, and made no answer. She had a vague idea of detaining him till help came.

She knew not the remorseless nature of the renegade.

" Blanche Heyward," he said, quietly, " best get up. Your father is coming."

Instantly the girl was on her feet and looking frantically round. With a sarcastic laugh Montriche grasped with one hand the long blonde hair which had escaped from its fastenings and fallen down her back.

" Now, fly if you can," he said.

A single effort convinced her of the futility of the task, and again the renegade laughed.

" Now, listen to me, mademoiselle," he pursued, in his rapid tones. " I never miss my aim, and your father is coming full speed, so that his nerves will be flurried. If you do not mount this horse behind me, so sure as God hears us, I will put your father where I put Mike Johnson. I give you till I count five to decide."

" Oh, Montriche! if you are a man," she gasped, " have mercy on him! What has he done to you?"

" One, two, three, four, if I say five he dies, and you're no better off," was the icy response, as the outlaw drew a second pistol from his breast and eyed the major, who was now within three hundred yards, with glowing eyes.

" Spare him, Montriche! My God! I consent!" screamed the unhappy girl, and Montriche held out his hand to her with a smile.

" I thought you would hear reason, mademoiselle," he said. " Put your little foot on my boot, so. Now your hand, so. Now spring."

And in a moment more poor Blanche was seated on the horse's croup, behind the outlaw, who remained halted where he was. As deliberately as if the major was not approaching, he unbuckled his sword-belt and extended it to twice its former length. Then he passed it round his own and his

companion's waist, hooking it in front of his own, so that the broad, strong band of leather and metal connected them firmly.

"Now, mademoiselle," he said, coolly, "I think you are safe for the present. Let us meet papa."

"My God, Montriche!" cried the agonized girl, "you deceived me. Are you going to kill him? You shall not. I'll scream. I'll pull your arm."

"Try it," said Montriche, sarcastically. Before she could resist, a pair of steel handcuffs were snapped on her delicate wrists, and the outlaw observed :

"I am not going to kill your father. Make your mind easy on that. I am going to stop him following us. In this I am kind, mademoiselle, for there are rough fellows in my band, and he might get hurt. Here he comes. Sit still, or I kill him."

The last words were snapped out like the snarl of a wild beast, and Blanche trembled in every limb as she heard the voice of her father close by, calling out :

"My God! Captain Richmond, what has happened? Is she hurt? Can she not sit alone?"

He had hardly noticed that the girl was tied to Montriche's waist.

The Black Panther turned round and shook back his long hair, as Heyward rode up to him. The pistol in his hand was concealed by the flowing mane of the horse, and he laughed as he answered :

"The matter is this, Major Heyward. You're an ass and I am the Black Panther."

Crack! went his pistol in the midst of the sentence, the muzzle against the brown horse's breast.

Up in the air reared the poor beast, and down he went dead in a heap, with the major's leg crushed under him.

The Black Panther turned his horse and cantered leisurely away, calling out :

"Good-by, major. Give my compliments to General D., and tell him that he hasn't got an officer on his staff smart enough to catch the Black Panther. Miss Blanche will be quite happy in a few days."

Bruised and half stunned as the major was, he found

strength to draw his revolver and point it at the insolent renegade.

He was confronted by the form of his daughter lashed firmly behind the other's back, and acting as an effective shield. For a moment the father trembled all over. Then he groaned.

"Better death than such dishonor!"

He fired shot after shot at the flying fugitives, desperately resolved on killing his daughter, if nothing else could save her from the fate that awaited her.

But Black Panther had cunningly calculated on the tremor of excitement and agitation. Every bullet flew wide of the mark, and before long, when the poor man managed to extricate himself from his steed, the form of the renegade chief was seen entering a pass in the mountains on the other side of the valley, and poor Major Heyward was alone in the world.

For a moment he looked at his revolver gloomily, and muttered :

"Why not? One shot and it will be all over. She will kill herself soon. I know it, and we shall meet again."

Then a more manly thought took possession of him, and he turned toward camp, crying aloud :

"Pursuit, pursuit, instant and remorseless. Let us keep together, and we'll hunt down this Black Panther yet, if Mike's woodcraft holds its cunning."

He strode rapidly back toward camp, when, on passing the great live-oak, behind which Blanche had disappeared, he came upon the dead body of the unfortunate hunter, stiff and stark, looking up at the sky with sightless eyes.

It gave him a shock and a feeling of helplessness, which was replaced by the stern determination of despair.

"Never mind," he said aloud. "He may hide where he likes, and I may have no help, but I will hunt him down, and slay the licentious wretch if I have to chase him and his band single-handed through the whole West."

He plodded wearily on to camp, and stood in the midst of his startled followers like a ghost risen from the grave, so pale was his face.

They saw that something had happened, but were far

from guessing the full extent of the calamity till the major spoke.

"Boys, your young lady's gone, and gone in the power of the incarnate devil Black Panther. That man who passed himself off on me—I ought to have known better—as Captain Richmond, is Black Panther himself, a French renegade to the Apaches. His pretended escape and Indian prisoner were all a trick to get in, and he has fooled us finely. The prisoner escaped by his connivance to take some message to the band no doubt. Now, boys, we can only do one thing, and that is, abandon the wagons, ride the mules, take all the ammunition we can carry, and chase Black Panther till doomsday, if we can save my daughter. Who'll follow me?"

A perfect roar of applause followed the question, and the hardy miners were busy in a moment in getting ready for the expected chase.

Before half an hour had elapsed, twenty-seven men, armed to the teeth, and loaded down with ammunition and grain, issued from the camp, mounted on mules, and struck off on the trail of Black Panther, leaving the wagons deserted behind them.

As they rode down to water the mules, the guide's story was confirmed to them by ocular evidence.

As he had said, the whole bed of the stream was full of nuggets of gold, half revealed by the washing of the water, and the most casual glance was sufficient to show that a "placer" of extraordinary riches was there.

Major Heyward groaned aloud :

"What value is gold now, boys, when we have lost our jewel? Let us search for her, and then we can come back and be rich. But till then, all the gold of the mines will not make us other than fools and cowards. Forward!"

They rode through the stream to the other side, and as the major's mule came out, she kicked out a glittering stone, that looked like a piece of glass, and shone even in the fast-gathering twilight.

"The robber was right," muttered the major. "Diamonds and rubies seem to lie here as thick as pebbles. This is a wonderful country."

Then he trotted off briskly on the road, to the pass where he had seen Black Panther disappear, and reached there with his men, just in time to see the outlaw, with a band of Mexicans, half-breeds and Apaches, gallop off up the mountains on swift horses, defying their pursuers. It was the few scattering shots that the Heyward party fired at Black Panther's band that startled the Hartsteins, many miles off, and sent Black Panther and his crew in hot haste through the passes, to escape a fire that they could not return with any effect in the darkness.

The superiority of the Sharpe's rifles and revolvers in the hands of the Americans, was, moreover, too marked to admit of dispute, and Black Panther, having gained the prize he sought—beautiful Blanche—was quite content to fly for the present.

As he went he said :

"Blanche Heyward, having spared your father has cost me dear. The next time I meet him, I swear to kill him, unless you throw your arms round me and beg me for your sake to spare him."

And that was the reason that Blanche Heyward, to save Gerald Leigh from the unerring bullet of Montriche, threw her arms round his neck, and begged him to desist.

When the jaguars came down in the dark and attacked the outlaw's party, Black Panther himself was disconcerted for the first time. Without staying to fight he fled along the rocky ledges to the south, and morning found him, minus five of his band, toiling toward the Rio Grande and safety, with his lovely prize still buckled fast to his waist.

And Gerald Leigh and Katrina Hartstein neither of them knew that the father of the captive girl was anywhere near them.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PANTHER'S DEN.

IN the midst of a wild and lovely glen of the Sierra Madre, surrounded by lofty and rugged cliffs down which foaming cascades leaped, and dashed themselves into clouds of feathery spray, while dark, solemn pines crowned the edges, like black plumes on a line of warriors' helms, the Black Panther and his band came to a rest at last.

Many a weary mile had they traveled at good speed, fleeing from the hot pursuit that they knew would soon be organized. All through that rapid march, Blanche Heyward had neved quitted the croup of Montriche's charger, save when at night she slept in broken and uneasy slumbers, surrounded by the fierce forms of Apaches, and more merciless half-breeds.

Contrary to her expectation, she had been kindly treated and unmolested during the march. At all halts she was left perfectly free to appearance, but the poor girl knew well that the eyes of watchers never left her, and she had too little self-reliance to dream of escaping alone, and unaided.

Where they were now she knew not; only, from the fact that they had passed through villages full of Spanish-speaking peasants, she judged that they were in Mexico. They had crossed so many streams of various kinds, by night and day, that she could not tell which was the Rio Grande.

Now, on a bright warm morning, the bandit chief turned his horse up a narrow cañon, with just space enough to admit a single file, and rode boldly on, till he was stopped by a heavy barrier of green timber, from behind which a rough voice shouted in Spanish :

“ *Quien es?*” (Who is it ?)

“ *Tigre Nero*” (Black Panther), replied that individual himself, and he was forthwith saluted with a torrent of Spanish welcomes, while the heavy timbers of the barrier creaked and groaned as they were lifted into the air, portcullis-fashion,

and the Black Panther and his band rode into a lonely valley.

In the expanse of this glen, all crammed with tropical fruits and flowers, where the banana and pineapple bloomed side by side with gorgeous creepers of every hue, and the monkeys and parrots filled the air with chattering and screaming, Montriche checked his jaguar-spotted charger, in front of a little village of light cane bowers, overgrown with roses and bright-hued creepers, from which ran forth a crowd of beautiful girls of all races and hues; who flocked round his horse, throwing flowers at him, kissed his hands and feet, and displayed the most extravagant appearance of joy at his coming.

Some twenty men, dark, truculent-looking Mexicans, and grim Indian warriors, most of them disabled from active service by the loss of some limb, appeared to be on guard over this bevy of beauties at the gate, and all were heavily armed.

The Black Panther unbuckled the belt that confined the captive-girl to his waist, and spoke in a tone of authority, in Spanish.

“ Girls, a new sister to be sealed to the Prophet. Take care of her. She is weary and faint with our march, and so am I. Refresh her and make her beautiful. I have spoken. Go.”

The imperious tone of his voice seemed to awe them all, for they shrunk silently back from his horse, and the Black Panther turned to Blanche.

“ You see my wives, mademoiselle. Brigham Young has none in better discipline. The only way out of this valley is the one we came in by. Judge whether you can escape by it, or if help can come thence. In three days prepare to become the Queen of the Apaches. Go.”

He gently pushed her to the ground from the charger’s croup.

In a moment she was seized by a dozen laughing girls, crying, in various languages:

“ Come, sister.” “ *Ven aca, hermana.*” “ *Viens, notre sœur.*”

They carried her off in a sort of triumphal procession, laugh-

ing and chattering like the monkeys in the trees, and Blanche Heyward disappeared in the midst of the bowers of roses, where every thing was soft, voluptuous, and enervating.

Meanwhile, the Black Panther seemed by no means disposed to follow their example. He remained on his charger, surrounded by his men, and questioned a grim looking Apache, with one eye and a missing hand, who seemed to be his lieutenant, and, like all the rest, spoke broken Spanish.

"What news, Pedrillo?"

"All quiet since you departed, Tigre. The scouts and spies are out, as usual, and report that the rancheros are getting over their last scare, and beginning to pasture abroad again."

"Ha! Near Chihuahua, or Durango?"

"Only near Durango, your worship. The Chihuahuans have a strong patrol of cavalry out scouring the country."

"The Black Panther must see to them," said Montriche, laughing. "We begin to need powder, and a few bullets and cuirasses would not be amiss."

Pedrillo grinned contemptuously.

"Ay, ay, señor. These Mexicans are coyotes."

Like all the Apaches and Navahoes, he was imbued with a profound contempt for the cowardly Mexicans, whom he was used to drive like sheep.

Montriche pursued his queries.

"Have you kept the men out of the valley, and well at work?"

"Yes, your worship," said Pedrillo, stoutly. "But they grumbled a good deal at not being allowed the pleasures of the valley, and if it were not for the gate, we should have had some trouble."

The Black Panther frowned.

"I'll teach the dogs their duty when I'm here," he growled. "Are they all out on duty now. These fellows will need rest before they go out again."

"All are out, señor."

"Tell them to be careful. I stole the last prize from the cursed Yankees, and some of them are after me. They may very likely cross the border. In that case we must put them on false scents, and keep them away from here till the last resort. They might give us trouble, Pedrillo."

"How, your worship?"

"By besieging us."

"None can enter here, senor. Artillery itself is powerless, for there is no place to plant a gun, and our gate is too thick to batter."

"I know it, Pedrillo, but they might starve us out. The Mexicans are cowards, but a few Yankees would give them courage; and we could not get out any more than they could get in."

"Your worship forgets the secret passage."

"A last resort, Pedrillo. Our valley once found, good-by to the quiet of the Black Panther's Den. We should be wolves without holes, wandering from place to place."

Pedrillo winced.

"That's very true, your worship."

"So that we must try to throw them off the scent, fight them outside—do any thing rather than let them in here," said Montriche.

"It shall be done, your worship."

"And in the mean time, Pedrillo, as we have at least five days' start, I shall go to rest. Set the guards, as usual."

"I will, your worship."

The Black Panther's followers had already filed away to another part of the glen, where a separate village of *jacals*, or light cane cottages, peculiar to Mexico, announced their quarters, and where their squaws awaited them.

It was the Black Panther's custom to place the squaws of all members of war-parties in the glen, whence they could not escape during his absence, for he feared the indiscreet tongues of the women when out of their husbands' control.

The home-guards, like all *guerillas*, became apparently peaceful farmers and *jarochos* (peasants), outside the valley, scattered in *jacals* about the neighboring villages.

In Mexico, as in Italy, brigandage is sustained by the passive sympathy of the neighboring country-people, and from the same causes.

The Black Panther was careful to treat all the neighboring *jarochos* kindly, and frequently to distribute the products of his forays among them. These raids were only made on the rich citizens of the large towns, and on the hated "Yanquis"

over the Rio Grande ; and the constant civil wars made it very easy for him to cover up his expeditions with the cloak of legalized warfare, and had enabled him, like the infamous Cortina, to run a long career of cruelty and rapine, without being brought to account for it.

As soon as his men had rested from their fatigues, and enjoyed three days of the beautiful valley, the chief was always careful to turn them out.

Thus, like the Prophet of the assassins in the East, he made this earthly paradise of the senses a coveted reward for faithful service, and obtained the devotion of his followers at a cheap price.

Now he slowly dismounted from his charger, with the air of a man entirely exhausted, and turned the animal loose in the valley.

The sagacious creature trotted off neighing into the midst of the bowers of roses, where a crowd of laughing girls seized and stripped him of his accoutrements.

The Black Panther slowly walked to a jacal larger than any of the rest, within whose shade he was welcomed by several more of his harem.

But he harshly repudiated them all, and they shrunk away in dismay, leaving him alone.

Then the bandit chief, completely exhausted by his long journey, in which the whole responsibility had lain on his shoulders, threw himself heavily down, and in a moment was fast asleep.

CHAPTER XIV.

REVELATIONS.

GERALD LEIGH, Katrina Hartstein, and her brother Fritz, remained on the ledge, after the flight of the Black Panther and his band, for some minutes, in doubt and wonder. The night was pitch dark, for the moon had not yet risen, and they could hear below them the sound of growls and crunching jaws, that told of the jaguars at work on the carcasses of

those unfortunates who had succumbed to the sudden attack.

The sound of horses' feet at a wild gallop, far away below them, betrayed the complete discomfiture of the band, and the three became convinced that they were alone on the mountains.

There was something terrible in the sound of those crunching jaws below, and Gerald involuntarily observed :

"We ought to go back, Fritz. It's no use going further. We know the worst."

"We shall have to wait for moonrise," returned Fritz, in a low tone. "Katrina won't find it so easy to call off her pets, as she thinks, till they are full."

Katrina made no answer. Perhaps she realized it herself, for the jaguars, free and in the dark, were very different to her easily-cowed pets of the daylight.

So they remained on the upper ledge, waiting silently, till the round red moon, a little past the full, rose slowly up in the east, and revealed the huge cats at work still, but nearly satiated, licking their chops and glaring up with their green eyes at the party above.

When the moon was fairly up, Katrina cracked her whip, and one by one the fierce brutes obeyed the signal, slowly and unwillingly, to be sure, but still obeyed it, and came climbing up the rocks to crouch beside the girl's horse, and rub against his legs.

"Now we can go home," said Katrina, and they turned and rode slowly back in dead silence.

Gerald was thinking of the face of Blanche Heyward, of her attitude as she threw her arms round the neck of this evil-looking stranger, and he shuddered with abhorrence at the remembrance.

"Had she been a helpless and unwilling captive," he thought, bitterly, "she would never have done *that*. Light of heart and light of love, she is false to me, and for *whom*? A bandit and outlaw, whoever he is, or he would not be where he is, and in that company."

And Katrina, what thought she?

It would be hard to say, for she spoke no word.

As for Fritz Hartstein, he was only cogitating on the identity of their foes, for he presently said :

"I say, Leigh, those fellows are not all full Apaches. I saw Navaho paint among them, and some Mexicans. They have come over the border, stealing cattle, and we shall have no more trouble with them. Kathi and her pets have frightened them effectually. We can go on safely to-morrow."

Gerald made no answer. He was in a maze of doubts and fears. For the moment he had forgotten Katrina, and his own difficulty. If Blanche was here, how came she here? was all his thought.

The sudden exclamation from the darkness, and his own discovery in the quick flash of the blue light, had been so astounding that he could not yet collect his senses. He had thought of Blanche as far away in her father's comfortable home, and here he had seen her in the midst of a band of ruffians, clasped in the arms of a renegade white Indian.

Had there been room for a mistake, he would have believed himself mistaken, but her own exclamation proved that she had recognized him too.

Full of bitter thoughts he rode back into camp, which they all reached in about an hour from the time they started.

It was determined, after consultation, that they would move on the next day, taking due precautions, and endeavor to reach the nearest settlements by forced marches, so as to place themselves under protection from roving war-parties.

Full of this design, they went to sleep, and long before daylight were up and on their way, taking a due westerly course, which brought them out at last into the very valley where Major Heyward encamped the evening before.

As they came in sight of the smooth, green expanse, dotted with live-oaks, a general exclamation of delight burst from all, which was followed by a cry of surprise, as they beheld the four wagons with their white tilts drawn up in a square round the great tree, and not a living thing near them save a few coyotes.

"My God!" ejaculated Gerald, in dismay. "I see it all. It is a train of emigrants, and Blanche was in it. The Indians have carried her off; and I, fool that I was, have given them the start."

Without waiting to explain his words to his astonished companions, the young man drove the spurs into Lightfoot, and shot off down the mountain and across the valley with the speed of an arrow.

It seemed hours to him before he reached the deserted wagons, which he found still and silent, just as they had been abandoned the night before.

There were no marks whatever of a struggle. The wagons were closed up, and the sets of mule harness hung on the sides where they had been left, the ends of the dangling traces gnawed clear of leather by the coyotes. There was a broad, plain trail of mules' feet going toward the north, and the mystery became complete.

The name "John B. Heyward, Los Angeles, Cal." on the sides of the wagons, told him that his suspicions were correct, and that the train belonged to Blanche's father. But where had he gone, and what had happened?

As he was revolving these confused thoughts in his mind, he heard the gallop of a horse, and Katrina Hartstein dashed up and halted close to him.

The girl was very pale, and her lips worked anxiously.

Gerald looked at her, and his memory returned. He remembered that she had never spoken a word to him, since that startled call from the darkness of "*Gerald Leigh!*" had saluted him the night before. She, too, had seen Blanche.

He remembered how intimate they had been growing before, and great fear took possession of him, lest the mischief had already begun as he had fancied.

"Katrina," he faltered, "what is the matter?" "Gerald Leigh," she answered, sternly, "what are these people to you?"

"What people, Katrina?" he asked, to gain time.

"The girl who knew you so well that she recognized you by a pistol-flash?" said Katrina, with cutting emphasis.

Gerald Leigh took the best course under the circumstances. He spoke the truth, and accepted the blame.

"That young lady was, I greatly fear, Miss Blanche Heyward, to whom I have been betrothed for more than a year, Miss Hartstein," he said. "It was to make a fortune for her that I came into the wilderness."

Katrina turned paler than ever. Her eyes blazed, and she trembled all over. At that moment her jaguars, which had been left behind by the furious speed of her horse, came bounding up; and she suddenly found words.

"I hate you! Wretch that you were, to come to us like a traitor!" she hissed out white as a sheet, with burning eyes. "Oh, I should like to set my jaguars on your false face, to tear the life from you."

The Jaguar Queen seemed to have caught the spirit of her fierce pets for the moment, and they in turn crouched snarling round her, as if waiting a word to obey the wish of their mistress.

Gerald Leigh fronted her boldly and with dignity.

"Perhaps it would be the best thing for both of us," he said. "God knows I never thought to meet you, Katrina, when I crossed the Stony Plain to the Tree of Death, and you know that I was never asked my state by any of you. I never tried to say a soft word to you, although it was hard to see your beauty and remember my own duty. I should have warned you all, I suppose, and showed you Blanche's picture. But I am punished for it now. She is gone forever in the power of a licentious Indian renegade, and I know not where to look for her."

Katrina sat looking at him for a moment, and then suddenly burst into a passion of tears and bowed her head upon the saddle.

Gerald did not dare to go near her, but looked away over the valley to where the white train of the Hartstein wagons was slowly approaching them.

As he looked he also discerned a dark train of mounted men coming out of another pass of the mountains, and trotting rapidly toward the wagons. As he looked closer he perceived that they rode mules, and jumped to the conclusion—and a true one—that it was the major and his party coming back.

Without waiting to speak to Katrina, he turned his horse and dashed away to meet them, when he drew up in front of the astonished major, crying:

"Major Heyward, for God's sake, what has become of Blanche?"

The old soldier uttered a deep, choking sob, as he answered:

"Gone, my boy, gone! Captured by a devil in the shape of man, a French renegade called Montriche, who has joined the Apaches, who fooled us all, and now has carried off Blanche, God knows where, for we have lost the trail."

And the major hung his head in deep dejection. He did not even inquire how Gerald came there, nor wonder at the singularity of his companions—for the Hartsteins were near enough to be recognized now.

He was soon surrounded by them, and at Fritz Hartstein's request, told them the story that the reader is already acquainted with, ending with the account of their tedious search of all night long, which left them in the morning with a lost trail.

When he had finished Fritz Hartstein spoke.

"Brothers, we ought to help this gentleman. He has no trailers in his party, and we are old hands at the business. Father, what do you say to camping in this valley, and prospecting for gold, while we seven make a party to help this gentleman? We can find his daughter if she is alive, and he can leave half of his men here to guard you. We can mount twelve men besides ourselves, and you will be safe with the rest."

"Go, my sons, and the blessing of God be on you," said Father Hartstein. "We will wait for your return."

"And with good horses instead of those slow mules, mein herr," said Fritz, "I'll be bound to overtake your renegade before he reaches his den in Mexico, or at least to get there the same day."

"And I will go too," said Katrina Hartstein, suddenly.

"You, young lady, what good could you do?" asked the major, surprised.

"Find your enemies," said she, laconically.

"And how?"

"With my pets," she answered, pointing to the jaguars crouching round the horse's feet. "They can follow their prey. They shall follow mine." And so it was settled.

CHAPTER XV.

PEDRILLO.

THE little hamlet of Nuestra Senora de Saludad, or "Our Lady of Safety," generally known on the country side by its abbreviation Saludad, slept quietly in the intense heat of the noonday sun, at the foot of the Sierra Madre.

Not a soul was stirring in the village, for every jacal was buried in slumber. The universal siesta embraced even the animals, the numerous dogs, curled up in the shade—for the sun was too hot even for them—forgot their watchfulness, and the cattle and sheep had gathered under the trees and tried to sleep.

The only living creatures abroad were the insects and birds, the drowsy hum of the former provoking longer slumbers, the twitter and chirp of flitting fly-catchers proclaiming the universal law of balance in nature, where life is so prolific as in the tropics.

It was the third day after the arrival of the Black Panther at his den, and the village of Saludad lay immediately below the glen in which he made his home.

In spite of Fritz Hartstein's confidence, it was evident that the pursuers had not arrived simultaneously with the pursued. Otherwise the inhabitants of Saludad would not have been enjoying their siesta so comfortably.

On a white dusty road that led into the heart of the village, a single horseman could be seen, in spite of the intense heat of the day, coming slowly down toward Saludad from the sierra. The horseman was dressed in a wild, picturesque fashion, partly Indian and partly Mexican. His costume was very rich, being covered with gold lace and bell buttons, and he rode a mouse-colored mustang of great beauty. He was armed with carbine and saber.

On a nearer inspection of the horseman, it could be seen that he had lost one eye and his left hand, while his face was the reverse of handsome, being heavily seamed with scars, and decidedly villainous in expression.

On his way to the village he passed a dense thicket of cactus and agave, at which he bestowed a piercing glance, more from Indian habits of precaution than because he suspected an enemy ; but Pedrillo was a very wary old warrior.

Apparently he saw nothing suspicious, for he pursued his journey to the village without halting, and was soon entering the outskirts.

Had he looked back at one time, he would no doubt have repented his hasty assurance of safety, for no sooner had he gone than two men rose up from the thicket, and one of them said in English :

"It's one of the band, Leigh. I'd know that horse among a thousand. It's the same that the traitor rode into our camp."

"It's not the same he rode that night, major," returned Gerald. "That was a remarkably large mustang, a bright yellow-tawny, dappled with black rosettes, like a panther."

"No doubt the villain changed horses," said the major, grinding his teeth ; "but that brute comes from his band. We've tracked him to his den. Oh, my God, Gerald, suppose we are too late!"

"Keep cool, major," said Leigh, soothingly. "We may not be too late to save her. We can not be too late to avenge her."

"Ay, ay," said Heyward, hoarsely. "You say true. Gerald Leigh, I owe much to you and your friends. Rescue Blanche alive, and if she is still worthy a gentleman's love, take her and be my heir. Oh, had I but said this a year ago, I might not be on the rack now."

"Be comforted, sir," said Gerald. "We must go back to our friends now, and tell them our news. Fritz Hartstein will be pleased that his trailing is found so correct."

"Ay, come," said Heyward. "Only place my hands on that villain's throat, and I can die happy, if I strangle him first."

They turned away into the thicket and went back some distance into the primeval forest of tropical luxuriance that clothed the foot of the sierra. Here they found, hid away in a dell where the luxuriant foliage concealed every one, the

seven yellow-haired giants of the Hartstein tribe, twelve of Heyward's miners, and Katrina Hartstein asleep among her jaguars. Every one was armed to the teeth, Heyward having contributed fire-arms from his wagons to supply the necessities of his German friends, and all were half-asleep in the heat.

As soon as Gerald Leigh had announced the discovery he had made, there was a general excitement. He checked it by telling them how important caution was, and proposed to go into the village, follow Pedrillo, and find out from him all that he could about the haunts of the band.

"I have passed for a Spaniard before now," he observed, "and as for my dress, I'll find some story to pass that off. You stay here, all of you, till I return."

As they were totally ignorant of the position and forces of the enemy, the plan seemed the best that could be adopted, and Gerald proceeded to make his dress more consonant to Mexican fashions.

Several of the miners, California style, had adopted the Mexican *calzoneros** and *sombrero*, and were otherwise rigged out in "Greaser" habiliments. A very few changes enabled Gerald to make himself into a passable ranchero, with broad glazed *sombrero* and gold band, embroidered velvet jacket and gold-buttoned *calzoneros*, the striped serape floating over the croup of his horse, as he rode along in a deep, embossed-leather saddle.

He went off through the woods in such a direction as to strike the road the other side of Saludad, when he cantered slowly into the village, and beheld the object of his search seated in the roadside posado, drinking *pulque*—a Mexican drink—and talking to the priest of the village.

Gerald dismounted and called for the hostler in true Mexican swagger, and clattered into the room where the worthy Pedrillo was seated, whom he addressed with grandiloquent politeness.

"I kiss your hands, cavalier. Reverend father, your blessing."

"Peace be unto you, my son," said the priest, a greasy, sen-

* *Calzoneros*. Bell-mouthed trowsers split up the outside and closed with buttons, universal in Mexico.

sual-looking man, with a gambler's eye. "Whence come you?"

"From Chihuahua, father," said Gerald, coolly. "I'm sick of living there. The Chihuahuenos are all cowards, and I have lived among the Yankees long enough to despise them. They're all afraid of the Black Panther over there, and as I don't care a curse for any man, I've come up here to see this Black Panther, and to offer to join his band, if he wants a man that can handle a saber better than any brave of his whole lot. I love wine, women and fighting, and they say the Black Panther gives his men plenty of all three. Do you know him, father?"

At the first mention of the Black Panther's name, Pedrillo and the priest pricked up their ears, but the latter put on an appearance of great innocence, saying :

"How should a humble priest know any thing of your Black Panthers, my son? Who is he?"

"A great guerrilla chief," said Gerald, enthusiastically—"the greatest in Mexico. Not know him, father? Why, every baby in Durango has been hushed with his name by its nurse. You must know him."

The priest winked.

"Perhaps I do, my son. This honorable cavalier, Don Pedrillo de—ah—ah— Well, Don Pedrillo, he may know the Black Panther better than I do."

"Well then, Don Pedrillo," said Gerald, turning to the one-eyed gentleman, "where does the Black Panther make his den? I want to see him and join his band, if he will take me."

Pedrillo looked askance at the other.

"What can you do?" he growled. "The Black Panther's cubs play rough, and you'll have to be able to hold your own among them. Who are you? What's your name, and what can you do?"

"I can take off your other hand at the wrist, in spite of your teeth," said Gerald, coolly. "And I can put a bullet into any hole you choose to shoot into that wall. Do you want to try me?"

And as he spoke he looked right into Pedrillo's eyes, rose and drew his sword. He knew that determined swagger was

essential to his safety in a nest of hornets such as he was in now.

The bravado cowed Pedrillo, for he saw that the other was a man of size and shape, promising strength and activity, and he did not feel disposed to test it.

"Be seated, cavalier; I only jested," he said, hastily. "I do not doubt that you are an accomplished swordsman and shot. I will take you to the Panther's Den this evening. We want brave recruits like you. To-day will be a white day for the band, for the chief takes a new queen, and all the band will feast together in the Panther's Den. You won't find it such a dark hole, I promise you. This worthy priest is coming up to perform the nuptials, for the Black Panther is a good churchman, and weds his queens in good style. 'Twill be a great feast."

Gerald's heart beat fast. He longed to cut down Pedrillo for his words, and yet they told him something he wanted to know.

"Ha! a new queen?" he said, as quietly as he could. "I heard in Chihuahua that he has a hundred or more now."

"So he has," said Pedrillo, chuckling. "But the Black Panther loves change. He has been into the land of the Yanquis this time, and brought down a little fairy such as we have never seen before. I suppose that he'll give away thirty or forty of his old ones to the band, to celebrate the nuptials."

Gerald ground his teeth under his mustache. He was not too late yet, if he could only stop this business before night. He indifferently observed :

"Ah; and so you were sent down for the priest, cavalier? I see."

"Yes, I came for father Miguel," said Pedrillo. "He has tied many a knot for the Black Panther before this—eh! father Miguel?"

The priest gave a fat, oily chuckle.

"I have done my endeavors to make the chief a married man. He has a very loving disposition, Pedrillo."

Gerald sat biting his under lip, to keep from swearing audibly, and shaded his eyes with his hand, that the glare might not be seen."

"Come, cavaliers," he called out, presently, thumping loud upon the table for the host; "talking's dry work. Set the pulque on the table, host, and bring us something to eat. I for one am famished."

The host was only too glad to obey the orders of the swaggering stranger, who ordered things as if he had a right, and plenty of money, too. In a very few minutes the eternal *tortillas* and *frijoles* were on the table, and the three were eating heartily, and the two bandits drinking as freely. Gerald kept his head clear for action, and spilled his liquor on the earthen floor, the consequence of which was, that he was master of his companion's secrets before long. When they began playing monte, as they soon did, and he allowed the priest to cheat him out of a few dollars, all the while plying them with drink, his victory became complete. Pedrillo told him that he was fit to be the captain himself, fitter than the Black Panther, who was mean and stingy, he said. As both got more and more drunk and affectionate, Gerald learned from them the way to the bandit haunt, how there was to be a grand illumination that night, and that the gates were to be thrown wide open.

"And since there's no fun till *we* come," he said, in a tone of drunken importance, "let us keep the Black Panther waiting as long as we like. We bring him the priest and a new recruit. What more can he ask?"

It was near sunset when the three left the posada, climbed on their animals, and rode slowly toward the sierra. Gerald pretended to be the drunkest of the party.

CHAPTER XIV.

KATRINA.

BEHIND the thicket in which Gerald and the major had lain when they first descried Pedrillo, the whole party were lying in wait by appointment.

Gerald, who had foreseen the difficulty of escaping from

the village, had planned this for the emergency, and was prepared to meet it.

He was resolved to capture both of his companions, and use their characters to penetrate to the bandits' den, if such a thing were possible.

He rode along, therefore, reeling from side to side on his horse, as if about to fall, and both the priest and Pedrillo, drunk as they were, conceived themselves bound to support their comrade. Pedrillo, who could no more have walked than flown, was perfectly safe, once on his horse, and the priest, on a fat little mule, was chanting Latin psalms at the top of his voice, intermingled with adjurations to the new recruit not to tumble off.

In this way they rode on till they were exactly opposite the ambush, when Leigh suddenly straightened up in his saddle, dealt Pedrillo a stunning blow behind the ear, which sent him to grass like a shot, and grabbing the priest by the collar with the other hand, canted him over the mule's tail in a twinkling.

"Out, boys," he cried, in a low, eager tone. "Carry them in, quick."

Fritz Hartstein stalked out of the thicket, caught up Pedrillo in one hand, and dragged him out of the road, while Adolph performed the same kind office for the unlucky priest.

They were both gagged and taken down to the dell, where a consultation was held over Gerald's news. It was at first resolved to wait till dark, and then try to storm the bandits' stronghold; but Katrina Hartstein, to the surprise of all, for the first time, interfered in the conversation, and observed that it would not do.

"For," she said, "if his emissary does not return, this Black Panther will surely suspect that they have been cut off, and that we are in the neighborhood. If he does, he will shut the gate, and Gerald Leigh has told us how impossible it will be to get in then without help. Something must be done to distract the monster's attention, and keep him amused till dark, for he probably has so many watchers out that we could not approach by daylight."

"Well, well," said Major Heyward, impatiently. "This

may be all very true, young lady, but what shall we *do* to engage his attention? I am on a rack of suspense every moment that keeps me from rushing to my daughter's side, and the least delay is dangerous. Think of what the wretch may do, with an innocent girl in his power, if he once realizes that enemies are outside!"

"You love your daughter very much," said Katrina, in a deep, melancholy voice. "Mr. Leigh is very anxious for the safety of his dear, betrothed Blanche, is he not?"

"Surely he is, and with reason," responded the major, hotly. "She is an angel from heaven, this poor Blanche of ours. God preserve her purity from the dangers that surround it!"

"It shall be preserved, sir," said Katrina, suddenly rising up. "I alone will go to this Panther's Den, and engage his attention till sunset. Your spotless daughter shall be preserved, if Katrina Hartstein is sacrificed for her."

She spoke with bitter emphasis, and walked to her horse.

"Good heavens, Katrina, where art thou going?" cried her brother, Fritz, in great dismay at her words.

"I am going to run a great risk to save a helpless girl," said Katrina, firmly; "and I am going to take my pets with me, to protect me. As soon as the sun sets, follow me. Ride softly to the gate; and then charge in, and God defend the right."

"But you must not, you shall not go," suddenly cried Gerald Leigh, starting up. "I can not allow such a disinterested sacrifice for my sake."

"Stay where you are," she said, commandingly, motioning him back. "I need no help, when my pets are round me."

As she spoke, she mounted her great iron-gray horse, and sat proudly on the curveting beast, while the jaguars gamboled like kittens round her.

Gerald thought that he had never seen a figure half as beautiful, nay, magnificent.

"Let no one seek to stop me, or I will set my pets on him," she exclaimed. "Do as I tell you, and all will be well. I will make this Black Panther crouch to the Queen of the Jaguars, and the gate shall be open when you come there, Nelly, farewell."

She struck her horse with the whip, and away he went with a leap, the jaguars bounding after him in a cloud of dust.

Gerald was about to follow, when Fritz Hartstein stopped him.

"You don't know our Kathi," he said. "She has said she'd set her jaguars on you, and she would too. She doesn't run so much danger as you think, for those pets of hers will probably frighten Apache and guerrilla alike. We can't do much better than wait as she has ordered us; for, from what you tell me of this Pedrillo's drunken revelations, it will be no easy matter to get into this bandits' den, if they want to keep us out."

And Gerald and Major Heyward, chafing with suspense as they were, were compelled to wait for the setting of the sun, before they could do any thing. To Gerald, the torment of waiting was fearful, knowing what he did. The Blanche of prosperity, flighty and wayward, had been fast fading from his mind before the charms of Katrina. But the fancied Blanche of misfortune and captivity had become doubly precious to him now, and any leanings toward Katrina were effectually quenched for the present.

He had already accomplished so much in the village that it was torture to him to let another do the rest, especially when that other was the girl who had almost confessed she loved him, and now, with unexampled generosity, was risking her own life and honor amid a horde of licentious bandits, to save a rival beauty from harm.

But while he paced up and down in the dell, waiting for sunset and cursing his inactivity, Katrina herself was galloping along the road, full speed, toward the Panther's Den.

From the drunken revelations of Pedrillo, Gerald had obtained a very accurate idea of the road, which he had communicated to the rest, and Katrina found no difficulty in following it.

It ran up the sierra, zigzagging and winding through ravines and around spurs of the rock, till it finally came, in a long curve, round a shoulder of the mountain, commanded all the way from the cliff top, where she could see several men walking and smoking, occasionally looking down.

That they saw her, was evident.

Katrina was a remarkable-looking figure, a tall and shapely girl, with the bust of a Venus de Medicis, the erect and elastic port of Hebe. She was dressed in a species of riding-habit of deer-skin, of the most ornate pattern, fringed and quilled extensively, while her flaxen braids were crowned with a fur cap, plumed with feathers.

In Mexico and on the plains all women ride man-fashion, and Katrina was no exception to the rule. She sat with all the grace and ease of an accomplished rider, and but for the swelling bust might have been taken for a man at a distance, for she was heavily armed.

But one part of Katrina's accompaniment could not be seen from above.

It was her jaguars. The acute girl had realized from the first that such a following would cause suspicion, and probably end in closing the gate on her.

But her jaguars could not be left behind. They were too valuable.

She had thought of a plan by which they would be useful, not only for defense of her own person, but for help to her friends.

And her jaguars, like all cats, were born sneaks.

So that, while she was riding slowly and in full view up to the outlaws' den, the seven sneaks were creeping along through the underwood at the roadside, pace for pace with the horse, and entirely unseen from above, so well did their brilliant markings correspond with the varying hues of the tropical foliage.

Katrina rode at a gentle pace now, as if perfectly aware that she was seen, and desirous of attracting notice. She had come on a dangerous errand, and to try a risky experiment. She was well aware that the utmost coolness was necessary to give her a chance for success.

She had come, well knowing the licentious character of Montriche, and his fancy for new beauties, deliberately determined to allure him by her own personal charms, to distract his attention if possible, just long enough for her friends to reach the gate, and to trust herself in the midst of the out-

laws, meantime, with no protection but her own courage, her weapons, and—her jaguars.

The risk that she ran amidst a crowd of desperadoes, as well armed as herself, and with no scruples to deter them from attacking a woman, did not daunt her. She loved Gerald Leigh with all the fervor of her wild, untutored nature, and, her first fierce burst of jealousy over, seemed to have but one desire left, to die in his service.

She was feverishly anxious to see her rival, Blanche Heyward, and measure with her own eyes the charms that had captivated Gerald Leigh.

"I will see her, and save her from this wretch for Gerald," thought the generous girl. "They will probably kill me in the attempt, but I feel I shall save *her*. And then, when I am dead, Gerald and his wife will weep tears of remembrance over my grave, and *she* will not be jealous of poor dead Kathi, who threw her heart away before she knew it. Oh, Gerald, Gerald! If we had but met one year earlier, how happy I would have made you!"

Poor, untutored Kathi! She burst into tears at the very thought as she rode, but hastily brushed them away and looked up, to find herself entering the narrow, winding cañon that led to the Panther's Den.

A thicket that obscured the entrance to the cañon also afforded a shelter, under which her jaguars crept silently after her; and as she rode in, the sun set.

There was no one to overlook her now.

With her fierce pets creeping at the horse's heels, Kathi rode up the winding cañon, and halted in front of the heavy portcullis, which was raised and swinging overhead, while a rough crowd of desperadoes, all richly dressed and heavily armed, stood clustered together near by, regarding her with great curiosity.

A woman, alone, entering the Panther's Den, uninvited or unforced, was evidently a novelty to them, and a pleasing novelty too, for more than one smile of no doubtful import was observed on the faces of the ruffians.

Beyond this pleasant-looking group lay quite a different scene.

The brief twilight of the tropics was almost over, and the

little glen was shadowed, even at noon, by the lofty encircling precipices. Now it seemed perfect night overhead.

But every bower of roses had also become a perfect bower of lights, with colored lanterns hanging from every twig, and long rows of torches of the wax palm burning in all the walks. Bright, airy-looking figures of girls, in every conceivable variety of rich raiment, gold and jewels glittering on all, flitted from bower to bower amid the illumination.

But Katrina's attention was attracted from all these to the figure of a man, magnificently dressed, who was advancing toward her in the strong glare of the torches; and it needed only to see the respect with which he was treated, to tell her that she was in the presence of the chief of the band, the terrible outlaw, *Montriche, the Black Panther.*

CHAPTER XVII.

IN THE JAWS OF DANGER.

MONTRICHE was accoutered in his gala costume. The French extravagance and picturesqueness of his taste was apparent in his dress, which was a rich refinement on Indian costume, such as one might expect from a bandit of unlimited wealth in gold and jewels, living in a land where every rock hides a vein of gold, and emeralds lie in the clay underfoot. Montriche affected the Indian chief, as much from French vanity as policy, though the bone and sinew of his band was composed of Apaches. He knew that the dress suited well the dark, sparkling beauty of his face, and his tall, wiry form.

His long glistening-black hair was twisted with gold beads into a roll, and hung down his back crowned with plumes. A tight vest of brown silk, worked with gold, revealed his bust, as if he had been in the war-path costume, stripped to the waist. Several collars and necklaces of rough emeralds and heavy gold armlets decorated his person, and his leggings were of velvet fringed with gold, while a Cashmere shawl,

worth a thousand dollars, robbed from some belle of Mexico, perhaps, stood in place of the homely Indian serapé or blanket. His sash was of gold net, containing a knife and Colt's revolver of exquisite beauty, besides which he wore a gorgeous saber.

Spite of her previous repugnance, Katrina could not help thinking that she had never seen a handsomer and more romantic-looking chief in her life than Montriche, the Black Panther.

The bandit advanced with a sweet smile on his handsome face, showing the white teeth under his jetty mustache. He was thinking, on his part, that he had never seen a more magnificent woman than Katrina, as she sat on her gray charger in the glare of the torches, looking proudly on the wondering russians at the gate.

He was puzzled at her appearance, and at once suspicious, but he covered it with an appearance of perfect courtesy.

He addressed her in Spanish first, thinking she might belong to the country, and said :

"At your feet, beautiful señorita. The Black Panther is too much honored by the visit of the queen of all beauties."

Katrina shook her head.

"I don't understand Spanish," she said, briefly.

Montriche changed to English at once.

"I might have known it," he said. "So much beauty, and of such a rare type, is not found in Mexico. You come from the north. The Black Panther bids you welcome, beautiful one."

"Are you the Black Panther?" demanded Katrina, abruptly.

"I am Count Claude de Montriche, King of the Sierra, whom my Indians call the Black Panther," said the bandit, proudly.

"I came to see you," said Katrina, boldly.

"To see me—and wherefore, lovely one?" he asked.

"Because they told me that you were the handsomest and the bravest man in Mexico," said the girl. "I have sworn that I will never wed any man who has a grain of fear in his nature, and they say you have none."

Montriche had one weak point, and Katrina, by feminine instinct, had hit it.

That point was his vanity.

He flushed up like a girl, his eyes sparkled, and he said :

"Then you have come to wed me, bright stranger? Dismount, and such a welcome shall you have as never greeted queen before. Come!"

He advanced eagerly to the horse's head, as Katrina walked the animal forward a few steps.

The next moment he recoiled, and clutched the pistol in his belt, while the bold Montriche, for the first time in his life, perhaps, turned deadly pale and trembled, as he heard the hollow growls of wild beasts.

Crouching and creeping stealthily by the horse's feet, and following like dogs, came seven full-grown jaguars; and their glaring green eyes were shining in the torchlight, as they advanced on Montriche; but Katrina cracked her whip, and all shrunk behind her horse in an instant, obedient to the signal.

Montriche uttered a sigh of relief, as he put up his pistol.

"You must be a brave woman," he said, "to have been able to tame them as you have. Will you now dismount and enter the Panther's Den? 'Tis a plain, rough place, as you see."

And the outlaw smiled with affected humility.

Katrina let her eyes roam over the brilliantly-lighted walks, and the flitting throng of gorgeously-dressed beauties, of whom a crowd had gathered, in curiosity to see what was going on at the gate. Their costume, or rather the lack of it, ill-compensated for by a profusion of ornaments, was a strong contrast to the modest and serviceable deer-skin dress of the Jaguar Queen.

She turned to the chief.

"Black Panther," she said, "I hear that you are a Mormon. Are these your wives?"

"Why do you ask?" he inquired, with a mocking smile.

At a signal from his hand, unseen by Katrina, several men stole past the couchant jaguars, and went to the ropes of the portcullis, while he was speaking.

"Because," said Katrina, gravely; "I must be the only one you have. You must put away all the rest. I will be first or nothing."

Black Panther laughed.

"You shall be first," he said. "I will do something for you I never did before. I will divorce the whole lot."

"But I heard in the village that you were to take a new queen to-night," said Katrina. "What will you do with her?"

Montriche laughed again.

"Oh! as to her," he said, "there you must positively grant me indulgence. I went to the trouble of visiting the States on purpose to get her, and I can not put off the ceremony. When the priest comes there will be *two* queens, that is all, but I promise you that you shall be the first."

"And suppose I refuse?" said Katrina, sternly.

The girl was prolonging the conversation and talking as she did merely to gain time. Every moment she detained the bandit by the open gate brought her deliverers nearer.

"Your refusal would cause me regret," said Montriche, calmly; "but the priest would marry us, whether or no you liked it. Father Miguel is a very accommodating person, and gives plenary absolution to all my wives. *Let down the gate!*"

He spoke the last words in a sharp, quick tone.

It was followed by a heavy *thud!*

Katrina started and looked round, while her heart seemed to leap up into her throat and choke her. The portcullis was closed!

She looked at Montriche. The Black Panther wore a satanic smile on his handsome, evil face.

"My gorgeous Jaguar Queen," he said, "you are caged, you and your jaguars. This night we will spread such a feast as the Panther's Den has not seen for many a day to welcome the mating of Black Panther with the Jaguar Queen and the white lily of the north. I love to astonish the world, and to-night is a night for pleasure. Now, will you dismount? I will show you your sister queen at once, and the band shall judge which is the most beautiful."

He offered his hand to Katrina with courtly grace, and the girl, after a moment's hesitation, accepted it, and slowly dismounted.

Then the Black Panther gave a signal and a burst of music

was heard from the interior of the bowers of light. Refusing his proffered arm, Katrina motioned to her "pets," and walked with the port of a queen down the brilliantly-lighted avenue, surrounded by her fierce jaguars, the timid girls standing trembling aloof at the sight of their strange visitor.

Only one thought possessed her as she went.

"I shall see this Blanche and save her, but they will kill me. Better so."

And thus Katrina Hartstein, in a den of robbers, walked to meet, and ventured her life to save, a rival whom most women would have hated.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE RIVAL QUEENS.

MONTRICHE began to suspect something under this strange visitor's sudden coming; and the non-return of Pedrillo with father Miguel, strengthened the idea. He did not connect it with Major Heyward's pursuit, and he had not seen Katrina on the night the jaguars attacked his party. He had heard her voice, however; and, putting the two things together, came to the conclusion that Gerald Leigh, Blanche's lover, about whom he knew a good deal, extorted by threats from the girl herself, was in the neighborhood, and had dispatched Katrina as an emissary to Blanche.

"I fancy the gentleman will repent his trust and the lady her temerity," he said, aloud, as he thought over it; "'twill be a rich treat to me to baffle him by the very means he has used to foil me. Two such beauties at a stroke! By Eros, 'tis too good to seem true!"

A moment after he ushered Katrina into a large circular arbor, thronged with people.

But all the people were girls. Not a man save Montriche was to be seen, and Katrina's heart began to lighten. She had estimated the men at the gate to be about twenty or thirty, and their arms she knew were inferior to those of her

own party. With her jaguars she began to feel that she was comparatively safe from insult. She did not know that the rest of Black Panther's band was in the hamlet of jacals in the rear of the valley and that she was now in the sacred recesses of his harem.

Reassured by her thoughts, she looked confidently round, and found herself the center of a circle of wondering gazers, while the tall form of Montriche was moving toward a canopy of white orange-flowers in the midst of the saloon.

Around Katrina, crowding timidly to peep, whisper, and wonder at the terrible jaguars and their stern mistress, were hundreds of lovely girls, of various forms and features, all soft, timid, and pleading-looking, evidently completely subdued and willing captives in the luxurious bowers.

Katrina shuddered as she thought of the long course of rapine and cruelty which had brought these poor girls together, and involuntarily her look became so fierce and menacing as she saw Montriche approaching her, that the girls in the circle drew back from her, whispering to each other.

The Black Panther, dark, triumphant and evil-looking, came pressing through the throng, which parted obsequiously before him, leading by the hand a white figure, and Katrina started and turned pale as, in the figure before her, she recognized her rival, the original of Gerald's miniature, Blanche Heyward.

For a moment a thrill of overwhelming jealousy and anger swept over the girl's heart, as she scanned the tiny, delicate form of Blanche, that reached no higher than her own breast.

"Is it for *this* puny little wretch that he refuses me?" she thought, as she sternly eyed the other from head to foot.

Poor Blanche looked frightened to death at the stately giantess who confronted her, surrounded by green-eyed, glaring monsters that gazed hungrily at her.

All the pride and willfulness had gone out of her pale little face, where the large blue eyes, larger even than Katrina's, looked pleadingly out as if asking for kindness from the beholder. It was the same pleading look that Katrina had noticed on so many faces in the Black Panther's harem.

The poor child was dressed in pure white loaded with

costly gold ornaments, and her long golden hair had been elaborately curled and dressed, and crowned with orange-flowers. She was attired as a bride, but her wistful, pleading little face was like a mockery of the robes; and as Katrina looked longer, insensibly her heart warmed toward the innocence and piteous entreaty of the girl who looked as if she dreaded—she knew not what.

Involuntarily the grand-looking maiden opened her arms and said :

“ Poor little child. Do not fear me. *I love you, too.*”

Blanche still hesitated and hung back in mortal terror, and Katrina, observing it, motioned back her fierce pets, and swept forward to Blanche, whom she softly encircled with her arms, and whispered in her ear :

“ *Fear not. I come to save you.*”

Montriche observed the whisper, and frowned.

“ My beautiful queens,” he said, with a sardonic smile, as he sauntered toward the door, determined to call out his men and kill the jaguars before he did any thing else, “ finish your plots in peace. When I come back you will wish that you had not brought in jaguars to defy the Black Panther.”

And he stalked away.

“ Let him go,” said Katrina, scornfully. “ I am the queen of all panthers, and I will tame him as I have them. Blanche, I come from Gerald Leigh. He will soon be here to save you.”

“ Oh, beautiful stranger,” said Blanche, imploringly, “ take me to him, if you love me. Oh, I have suffered such untold agonies of fear since I have been in this wretch’s power.”

“ You will soon leave it,” said Katrina, confidently. “ It can not be long now before they come, and then—we shall see.”

She started with Blanche to leave the saloon, when they heard a loud voice at the outer gate of the Panther’s Den, shrieking, in Spanish :

“ *Madre de Dios! Por amor de Dios! Permitame entrar, hermanos! Somos matado! Somos matado!*”*

* Mother of God! For the love of God! Let us in, brothers! We are being killed; we are being killed!

CHAPTER XIX.

THE PANTHER AT BAY.

MONTRICHE himself was near the gate when he heard this piteous cry, and he muttered, immediately :

“ *Sacré nom !* 'Tis the priest, Miguel, and drunk at that ! I know his voice. What's frightened him, and where's Pedrillo ?”

He turned round to look at the gate. The guards were lounging near it, and seemed disposed to treat the petition with contempt.

The Black Panther stalked forward.

“ There's mischief afoot to-night, boys,” he said. “ That woman is nothing but a spy, and the cursed Yankees are outside, waiting an opportunity to get in. Get your arms ready, and we'll *let them in*, and give them a warm reception. We'll teach them to bay the Panther in his Den.”

He was answered by a growl of satisfaction, and the Apaches and bandits began to handle their carbines.

But again from the outside came the priest's voice, screaming :

“ Brothers, comrades, open for the love of God ! The Yankees have chased Pedrillo and myself here, and they are close behind, ready to kill us.”

Still no one paid the slightest attention to the cries. The Black Panther only laughed at the priest's dilemma.

Then the chief set his whistle to his lips, and blew three short puffs.

Instantly his warriors came flocking from the other end of the valley, all armed and mounted, and the great jaguar-spotted war-horse, with the celebrated black panther-skin under the saddle, came trotting out of the middle of the bowers of roses, and stood whinnying by his master.

Black Panther leaped into his saddle, and drew his saber.

“ Now let the priest and his pursuers in,” he cried. “ Let us show these Yankees what the Panther's cubs are made of.”

Instantly the portcullis rose quickly in the air, caught up by the strength of a dozen men at the ropes.

It was hardly clear of the ground when Pedrillo and father Miguel rushed in, followed by two huge men with broad yellow beards and drawn swords.

One of them flew at the men who were working the portcullis, and in a moment had cut right and left, with fearful effect. His sword seemed to be as sharp as a razor, for off went two hands at the wrist the first stroke.

The second man grasped the ropes, defended by the first, and raised the heavy gate single-handed, with a velocity that told of great strength.

In less time than it takes to write it, up went the gate, and in dashed a swarm of horsemen, headed by the well-known form of Major Heyward, sword in hand.

"Ah, dog! I have you at last!" he shouted, and charged straight at Montriche.

The renegade chief met him with equal fierceness and more skill.

His followers were more numerous than the major's party, and on horseback were far more at home.

In a moment both parties engaged fiercely by the light of the torches, and Montriche uttered a triumphant shout as he threw Major Heyward to the earth, with a severe saber-cut over the head.

But on the other side there were six men better than any bandits found to oppose them.

These were Gerald Leigh, Fritz Hartstein, and four of his brothers. The other two had effected the rush at the gate.

All six being tall and large, five of them giants, all being armed with the same razor-like swords, they made fearful havoc among the outlaws.

Pistol-shots were flying round promiscuously in the darkness and deceptive flashes of torchlight, but they were mostly without effect. The sword became the queen of weapons in such a fight.

And the seven Germans and Leigh were all old swordsmen, prompt to cut, thrust and parry with lightning rapidity.

Inferior in numbers though their party was, this little band fighting in the advance lopped off heads and arms, decapitated

horses, and played the mischief generally with the bandits.

Montriche himself, who seemed to be a magnificent swordsman, was the only man who appeared able to oppose them, and even he backed away from the little band, that, keeping close together, defied every one with their serried ranks and trenchant blades.

The miners of Heyward's party, old Californians, fought in different style.

They had no swords, and would not have known how to use them had they possessed them, for swordsmanship is not much cultivated north of Mexico.

But they all had revolvers, many of them a pair; and these they knew how to use with fearful effect, waiting coolly for the exact instant when every shot would tell.

The bandits had only carbines and sabers, with a few old horse-pistols, for in those days Colt's revolvers were too costly and precious to have reached the hands of Mexican guerrillas. The chief was the only one who possessed them,

Thus it came to pass that in spite of superior numbers, the Black Panther and his band found themselves pierced and driven back by the fierce charge of twenty desperate men, with better weapons.

And all the while the light was growing stronger as they were driven nearer to the brilliantly-lighted bowers of roses.

Montriche alone was unconquered, and raged like his prototype of the brute creation, wild with rage.

Wherever he came the fight was evenly-balanced by his lightning quickness and ferocity.

Already several miners were wounded, and two of the Hartsteins had been struck by bullets, a loss which the smaller party could ill afford.

But then, all of a sudden, came the gallop of a horse, and a fresh figure made its appearance on the scene. It was Katrina Hartstein.

The roar and snarl of the jaguars was fearful to hear, as they leaped into the fray despite the lights and noise, cheered on by their mistress. On the same charger with Katrina, clinging close to her, was the slender form of Blanche Heyward, white and delicate. The noble German girl was protecting her rival, and bearing her to Gerald's side.

At that sight the tumult became ten-fold.

"Shoot down the tall woman—rescue the young queen!" yelled Montriche, striking such a fell blow at Gerald Leigh, with whom he was then engaged, that it beat down the latter's guard and lighted on his head with the flat of the blade, stunning him for the moment.

Like a flash, the Black Panther turned his horse, cut his way through the press to where Katrina had halted in the midst of her friends, and fired the pistol in his left hand full at her back.

The girl leaped up in the saddle with a shriek, and fell back, as the desperate chief pressed forward, seized Blanche Heyward like a baby, and flung her over his saddle.

But the momentary occupation was fatal to him.

With a roar like a wounded lion Fritz Hartstein dashed at him.

The Black Panther's back was turned, but he twisted round in his saddle when he heard the warning shout of his men, and threw up his saber from where it hung by the sling to his wrist.

In a moment more Fritz Hartstein was *on his left rear*, with the fury of vengeance in his eye, the strength of a giant in his Herculean form, a sword like a razor in his hand.

His first blow was guarded by the Black Panther, but the second caught him a back-handed blow at the waist.

So fearful was the impetus of that blow, aided by the bound of the horse, that it shore clean through flesh, bone and gristle, and cut the unhappy man well-nigh in two.

The Black Panther uttered a fearful yell, like his dying namesake, and fell from his horse dead, carrying Blanche with him, the blood spouting in torrents all over the white form of the girl, who had fainted dead away, and seemed as lifeless as the chief.

The instant their chief fell, the Apaches and guerrillas seemed to be entirely disheartened, while the Americans took fresh courage.

Leigh and the Hartsteins in the van, the Californian miners spreading out on the wings, they drove the demoralized bandits like a flock of sheep down the long avenues of torch-light, through the rosy illuminated bowers, now silent and

deserted, and so in a circle back to the gate, which they found closed.

Then, like all tropical races, when undeniably overmatched, the same men who had fought so well at the beginning of the fight, seemed to lose all heart whatever. Death they did not seem to fear, for they flinched not from shot or stroke, and died silent and sullen, facing their foes. Not one of them seemed to think of contending against his fate or dying fighting.

They died like criminals being executed, and that was all. The slaughter was purely a slaughter, and had there been many to kill, the Americans must have stopped from sheer disgust.

But they were excited to frenzy by the atrocities told of the Black Panther and his band, and it was not till the last Indian and guerrilla had fallen, doggedly silent, that they turned to other thoughts and found themselves in full possession of the Panther's Den, while the poor slaves of the outlaw chief were peeping timidly from the thicket where they had hid when the first irruption of enemies took place.

CHAPTER XX.

THE END OF ALL.

THE next morning the Panther's Den presented a far different scene from what it had at any time during the past years.

Over the whole valley brooded an atmosphere of content and purity that it had never known before.

The girls moved about with serene, modest faces, very different from the half-pleading, mournful looks of the night before. They seemed at last to know that they were *free*.

The men of Major Heyward's party were scattered about here and there among them, seemingly enjoying themselves hugely, but all were decent, quiet and orderly.

The major himself, his head bound up from the cut received

the night before, was out, and on the watch to maintain discipline.

Several of the Hartsteins were also busy giving their directions to a troop of girls, who were working under their supervision and assistance, and every thing had an air of bustle.

But in one part of the camp the scene was very different.

In the largest bower of all, completely covered with white roses, and other white creepers, on a couch made of rose-leaves, such as the luxurious Sybarites once coveted, lay the Jaguar Queen, dying.

Yes, Katrina Hartstein, the brave, devoted girl, who had ventured her life to save her rival's honor, had realized her own presage of the night before. She had saved Blanche at the cost of her own life.

The bullet of Black Panther had struck her in the back, on the left side, above the heart, and torn its way through the lungs, leaving her with a mountain loading her breast, almost unable to breathe, and fast sinking from loss of blood.

Her eyes were closed, and her breathing was hardly perceptible at most times, but every now and then she would draw a long, rattling breath, as the blood that filled the left lung choked her. And then would come terrible spasms of pain near the heart, during which even her iron self-control gave way, and the poor girl gasped and shrieked for breath.

After one of these spasms it was that at last she seemed to be easy. Her breath came freer, and she opened her eyes. A faint smile of recognition overspread her pale face, as her glance fell upon the group of sorrowing friends which surrounded her. She motioned her brother Fritz to approach, and he advanced and took her hand. After two or three ineffectual attempts to speak to him, she managed to articulate :

"Good-by, brother Fritzer! Kiss father for me, and tell him Kathi longed only to see him and mother before she died."

Then motioning him away, she beckoned to Gerald Leigh and Blanche Heyward, who advanced and kneeled down by her couch. Her strength was fast failing, but she managed to articulate :

"Kiss me good-by, both of you, and promise to think kindly of me."

Reverently, and as calmly as he could, Gerald Leigh pressed his lips on those of the dying girl.

Kathi shivered all through her fast-failing frame, smiled faintly, and then fell back dead, just as Blanche Heyward kissed her farewell.

Reader, there is but little more to tell.

The body of our poor Kathi was interred on the spot which she had hallowed by her heroic self-sacrifice, and it was a sad and mourning train that left the Panther's Den on the next day.

The unfortunate victims of Montriche, restored to freedom, scattered over the country to return to their various homes. The cowardice of their protectors was the principal cause of their capture, and they were easily returned to safety.

The party returned to the valley where the Hartsteins and Californians were camped together. That camp proved the fortune of every member of the party. Extraordinarily rich in gold, it also proved to contain quantities of those precious stones, which, rediscovered of late years, have made the Arizona gem-fields the scene of an excitement rivaling the California fever of 1848.

Gerald Leigh and Blanche Heyward were happily married, and live on the Heyward Ranche near Santa Barbara. The Hartsteins and Burtons settled near them, and increase and multiply daily.

Major Heyward is getting old and shaky, and loves to sit in the corner now and tell his guests over and over again of his old battles in the army; but the memory of Kathi is kept alive in that household in the name of its eldest child, and Blanche Leigh is never jealous of her husband's undying love and reverence for the devoted girl who saved his wife from the terrible clutches of the BLACK PANTHER.

THE END.

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